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Animating Adult Audiences: The Puppet Theatre of Ronnie Burkett

by

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ABSTRACT

For over two decades, Canadian puppeteer Ronnie Burkett has been entertaining and provoking adult audiences with his unique solo performances. Burkett and his beautifully-crafted marionettes have earned praise at home and abroad, successfully elevating puppetry from the environs of children's or fringe theatre to the main stage. What's more, Burkett's marionettes evoke powerful emotional responses from its audiences that suggest the immense potential for adult audiences to connect with puppetry in a childlike, but not childish, way.

In this thesis, I will explore the reasons for puppet theatre's appeal, focusing on the three essential elements of puppet performance: puppeteer, puppet, and audience. By applying a close-reading to two of Burkett's early performances—Tinka's New Dress (1994) and Street of Blood (1998)—I will demonstrate concretely how the connections between these three constituents build a unique theatrical experience capable of involving adults in a playful process of co-creation and imagination.

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INTRODUCTION

After decades of unfair devaluation as mere children's fare, puppetry in North America has garnered attention in recent years as a viable entertainment alternative for adult audiences. Puppets have always graced stage and screen when human actors could not adequately meet the characters' requirements; for instance, the 1736 production of Voltaire's The Prodigal Son which "featured a hanged man who fell from the gallows in pieces, reassembled himself, and ran off" (Blumenthal, 93), or the legions of alien characters in George Lucas' original Star Wars trilogy. Yet puppets rarely dominated the action when human actors would suffice. Recently, puppets and adult audiences have enjoyed a tentative reunion. As advances in digital technology allow computer animation to fill roles traditionally reserved for puppets, new uses for puppets are being explored. Television shows such as Greg the Bunny, Puppets Who Kill, and Crank Yankers feature puppets in leading roles, while Trey Parker's 2004 Team America: World Police showcases an exclusively puppet cast in an R-rated film. Rock singer Beck has incorporated marionettes of his band's likeness into his current stage show. In the more traditional theatre scene, the Broadway musical Avenue Q won a Tony award for its adult-oriented depiction of Sesame Street gone awry, and so-called puppet slams, brief cabaret puppet acts named after the poetry slams of the 1990's, have cropped up in cities across America (Weir, 71). The revitalization of puppetry in these popular settings extends to more refined venues as well. At Montreal's 2007 *Festival Transamerique*, the Calgary-based company Old Trout

Puppet Workshop presented their new show Famous Puppet Death Scenes alongside theatre luminaries such as Belgium's Guy Cassiers and Canada's Robert Lepage. The latter, incidentally, used puppets himself in his critically acclaimed solo show La Face Cachée de la Lune (2003). Puppetry today straddles the shrinking chasm between popular and high art as it has done for centuries, reconnecting with adult audiences in a way that produces childlike awe without infantilizing its viewers.

In North America, few puppeteers have succeeded in escaping the puppet stigma and creating elaborate puppet theatre for adults more completely than Alberta's Ronnie Burkett. Born June 10, 1957, Burkett was raised by adoptive parents Eileen and Ray Burkett in Medicine Hat, Alberta where, at the age of seven, he opened an encyclopaedia at random and stumbled upon an entry about puppets. Young Burkett's enthusiasm for this newfound art form only blossomed with time, and by the age of 14 he was attending puppetry conferences and seeking mentorship from veteran puppeteers. At 19, Burkett wrote a letter to acclaimed American puppeteer Bil Baird and was invited to New York as Baird's apprentice. After a variety of television puppetry stints that did little to satisfy Burkett's burgeoning ambitions, he founded his Theatre of Marionettes in 1986.

Since its inception, Burkett's Theatre of Marionettes has been performing cheeky, bawdy puppet theatre for Albertan audiences. The first production, a Commedia dell'Arte-inspired musical called Fool's Edge premiered at the 1986 Edmonton Fringe Festival, followed shortly thereafter by the melodramatic operetta Virtue Falls and the Punch and Judy derivative The Punch Club (1989).

In 1991 his Gothic murder mystery Awful Manors played to sold-out houses at Toronto's Canadian Stage Company, marking eastern Canada's embrace of the western Canadian puppeteer. While his shows drew more and more audiences, Burkett acquired both a loyal following and a reputation as a rebellious mischief-maker in the Albertan theatre community and beyond. In his Wild Theatre: The History of One Yellow Rabbit, Martin Morrow classifies Burkett as one of "the bad boys, the troublemakers, the scapegraces, the *enfants terribles*" that Calgary's One Yellow Rabbit theatre tended to attract in droves (Morrow, 310).

When Tinka's New Dress (henceforth referred to as Tinka) premiered at Winnipeg's Manitoba Theatre Centre in 1994, Burkett had already solidified his reputation as a masterful puppeteer for adult audiences. His incredible skill as a puppeteer and his proclivity for extensive dialogue between his characters existed from the origins of Theatre of Marionettes. However, the content of early shows tended towards the ribald and crude without substantial depth. Awful Manors, for instance, featured a Canada Council for the Arts representative cheekily named Phyllis Stein. Playful disrespect for institutional control and a growing desire to address the state of the arts through his work exist in this early incarnation, but the approach was still that of a youthful rebel rather than a mature artist. Tinka represented a dramatic departure from the style of puppet theatre that had come to be associated with Burkett. Though the show certainly retained the elaborate puppetry, irreverence, and playfulness of his earlier work, the core themes of the piece distanced Tinka from the frivolity of those precursory pieces. After Tinka,

audiences and critics suggested that Burkett had changed his style, prompting Burkett to respond,

> No, I've found my style. That's what the last 10 years have been -- not worrying so much about technique, but about why and how and what devices I use to speak to audiences, one of which is text. (Qtd. in Posner)

While Burkett's experimentations with style have persisted throughout his career, Tinka is identified by many, including the artist himself, as the point at which Burkett found his own niche in the world of puppetry and theatre. His style of theatre had become identifiable as distinctly Burkett. Richly-written dialogue and difficult adult themes became as much a mainstay of his work as the large casts of two-foot-tall marionettes manipulated by the always-visible performer. In his 1998 show Street of Blood, Burkett tackled issues similar to those addressed in Tinka but of a more personal nature: here, the alienated other is not a rogue puppeteer fighting the establishment, but a young gay man from rural Alberta. Indeed, these two plays encapsulate Burkett's newly-honed aesthetics as well as the themes of loneliness and isolation prevalent in all of his post-Tinka work. Along with Happy (2000), a heart-wrenching meditation on the grieving process, Tinka and Street of Blood are parts one and two of the retroactively-named Memory Dress Trilogy, a group of plays that form the turning point in Burkett's career.

With the success of the Memory Dress Trilogy and later work, Burkett has been widely hailed as a national treasure. According to Stephen Nunns, "when

Canadians talk about their major theatre artists, inevitably two names come up: Robert Lepage and Ronnie Burkett." Internationally, critics are similarly generous. Michael Feingold, theatre critic for New York's The Village Voice, also pairs Burkett with Lepage as Canada's theatre geniuses, imploring Canada to

> send us works of genius....Just send Tinka's New Dress and [Lepage's] Needles and Opium and you get awards, rave reviews and sold-out houses. Neither of these pieces played in New York for more than two weeks, and people are still talking about them. (Qtd. in Moher)

Overseas as well, Burkett has been showered with awards and treated to consistent full houses. Yet in spite of Burkett's success, there has been a dearth of academic attention paid to him. Stephen Nunn's "Holiday for Strings" and Liz Nicholls' "World on a String," both accessible critical articles focusing solely on Burkett's career, represent two rare exceptions to this critical lacuna. Only a smattering of others have devoted chapters or paragraphs to him in larger works. Jennifer Stoessner's Ohio State University Master's thesis "Infecting the Inanimate: Puppet Theatre Responds to AIDS," for example, devotes a chapter to Burkett's Street of Blood, while Morrow's history of One Yellow Rabbit theatre briefly outlines his career to date. Janne Cleveland of Carlton University (Ottawa) has undertaken an elaborate graduate research project on Burkett.

This lack of critical interest extends to the study of puppet aesthetics in general. Despite its rich history and impressive longevity, puppetry as a subject

of critical study has been largely overlooked. As Steve Kaplin lamented in 1999, "more books get published on soap operas than on puppetry. There are few puppet scholars in [America] and no puppet critics" (19). Indeed, while numerous famous theatre artists have ruminated in passing on the appeal of the puppet, few scholars have attempted to explain this fascination in depth. On the other hand, the attraction of theatre artists to puppets offers a certain amount of insight to the unique theatrical power of the puppet; for instance, Edward Gordon Craig's infamous suggestion in "The Actor and the Ubermarionette" that actors should strive to be more puppet-like, or Heinrich von Kleist's brief essay, "On the Marionette Theatre." Similarly, the plethora of historical and descriptive texts concerning puppet theatres throughout the centuries, such as Eileen Blumenthal's Puppetry: A World History, provide wonderful overviews of the genre, but tend to shy away from in-depth analysis of the artistic form they describe. Analysis can be found in the publications of puppeteers themselves, whose astute observations of their own audiences and intimate understanding of the art they practice offer important insight into the fundamental appeal of puppetry. Bil Baird's The Art of the Puppet (1965) and Michael Meschke's In Search of Aesthetics for the Puppet Theatre (2001) represent two compelling examples of artist-penned sources. Lastly, a handful of theorists dealing with puppetry assist in applying a theoretical frame to the phenomena described by historians and artists. Prague School scholars such as Peter Bogatyrev took a semiotic approach to folk puppetry, an early theoretical foray into the genre to which later scholars inevitably refer. Of these contemporary scholars, most notable is perhaps Steve Tillis' 1992 Toward

an Aesthetic of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art, which offers a balanced, in-depth exploration into the questions of how a puppet may be defined and how the puppet relates to the audience. While this work consciously ignores the puppet-puppeteer dynamic, it constitutes the most complete consideration of puppetry aesthetics to date in the English language.

Drawing upon these critical sources and others, I will unpack the multilayered performances of Ronnie Burkett's Tinka's New Dress (1994) and Street of Blood (1998). In addition to the scarcity of critical publications on Burkett himself and puppet theatre in general, an analysis of these two retired shows poses the challenge of reconstructing the performance text. No video recordings exist, and without having had an opportunity to see either show I have turned to a variety of other sources in order to complete this reconstructive task. Of primary importance are the published scripts, including the thoughtful and lucid descriptions of both sets and Burkett's movements. These texts also include photographs of the marionettes in action, recreating the visual spectacle that is so important to Burkett's theatre. Still, the static nature of these depictions acts as a hindrance in visualizing the performances. To counteract this problem, I attended Burkett's latest show, 10 Days on Earth, in October, allowing me to witness his style firsthand. The 1992 video A Line of Balance provided further evidence of Burkett in action in the form of brief clips of Awful Manors performed at Theatre Network in Edmonton, Alberta. While all of these sources prove quite useful in establishing the aural and visual impression of Burkett's work, they fail to convey the reactions of audience members present at Tinka's New Dress and Street of

Blood. A complete record of these reactions would be impossible to attain, but I have attempted to gain some insight into this area of the productions through various reviews as well as through my interview with Burkett in November 2006.

Through close readings of the recreated performance texts of Tinka and Street of Blood, I intend to suggest ways in which Burkett's theatre, and indeed puppet theatre in general, might serve to connect with an adult audience in a way that live-actor theatre cannot. In my first chapter, I employ theories espoused by puppeteers, puppet scholars, and theoreticians from related disciplines in order to establish a poetics of puppetry. My approach situates puppet, puppeteer, and audience as equally significant contributors of the puppet performance and, in this way, strays from the stage-centric tradition of poetics by privileging of the audience in the production of the piece. Having mapped the phenomenological relationships between the three constituents, my second chapter explores primarily the audience's complicity in the creation of the fictional world of the stage, as well as ways in which the audience's participation in the event affects their experience of the performance. Finally, my third chapter uses Street of Blood as an example of the significant relationship between puppeteer and puppet, interpreting Burkett's manipulation of that relationship in an effort to encourage new ways of responding to controversial issues. The principles introduced in Chapter 1 will be concretely applied to these early works of Burkett's oeuvre, revealing several keys to Burkett's appeal and, but extension, the potential power of puppetry.

CHAPTER 1: THE POETICS OF PUPPETRY

With origins dating back to prehistoric figurines carved in wood, stone, or bone, puppet traditions are as ancient as they are varied. In the East, many strictly-codified, traditional forms of puppetry have been preserved throughout the centuries, including the beautifully-carved Japanese rod puppets of Bunraku and the delicate shadow puppets of Balinese Wayang Kulit. In the West, however, puppet theatre has undergone a shift in perception in recent centuries. Since the inception of realism in the late 19th century, Western puppetry, particularly in North America, has been relegated to the realm of children's theatre. There have been rich traditions of puppets as political instigators (Vermont-based Bread and Puppet Theatre), tragic heroes (often Shakespearean, most recently the 2007 Chicago Shakespeare Theater/Colla Marionette Company production of Macbeth), religious icons (effigies of saints in religious processions), and slapstick comedians (famously, England's traditional Punch and Judy hand puppets). However, contemporary audiences unabashedly equate puppetry with theatre for young audiences. Although this conflation of the two unfairly limits the reaches of puppetry's potential, it does draw attention to a childlike fascination that grips audiences of the puppet theatre, regardless of age. Puppet theatre asks its audiences to breath life into the animated inanimate; it is an act of creative imagination that is often associated with the child. The spectator of the puppet theatre is a spectator engaged in play. Through the negotiation of the various paradoxes inherent in the form, combined with the safety to explore

encouraged by its childhood associations, puppet theatre has the potential to open a new theatrical experience to audiences in which familiar narratives and issues may be explored in an altogether new way.

As an entity onstage, a puppet may assume a variety of forms. Typically, three general categories emerge: jointed marionettes, moved with strings held by the operator above; rod puppets, controlled from above or below by thin poles attached to their extremities; and hand puppets, manipulated directly by the puppeteer's hands. While these classifications encompass a vast array of potential puppets, they do little to communicate the overwhelming variety present within the categories themselves. Swedish puppeteer Lasse Akerlund, for instance, cast a tomato as the lead character in Macbeth and King Duncan was portrayed by a ketchup bottle (Blumenthal, 76). While the objects in this example are manipulated by hand and thus could justifiably be labelled hand puppets, they are far removed from the glove puppet worn on the puppeteer's hand that also falls into that category. The host of possible puppet constructions gives rise to an equally multitudinous array of movement styles; however, the puppet's motion ultimately depends on the category to which it belongs. While a jointed marionette has the potential to move quite realistically, the rod puppet is often slightly more stunted and the motions of hand puppets are the least distinct and natural. Interestingly, those puppets with the least range of motion tend to be the closest physically to their manipulators: a glove puppet has only as much motion as the puppeteer's fingers will allow, whereas a marionette that is separated from its manipulator via its strings often possesses the greatest capacity for movement.

Broadly speaking, a puppet can be characterized as an object imbued with life when it is manipulated by a human operator or operators before an audience. The definition is my own, but has been created by combining the definitions of Bil Baird (13) and Steve Tillis (28). The plethora of objects that could constitute puppets necessitates a definition capable of including the numerous variations that exist. My description demands three necessary components: the puppet, which acts as the physical embodiment of the character; the puppeteer, who infuses the puppet with life by giving it movement and, at times, vocal expression; and the audience, which completes the process of life-giving through the playful act of imagination. Within this trinity, a series of relationships are developed: puppet-puppeteer, puppet-audience, puppeteer-audience, and puppet/puppeteer-audience. While a variety of other relationships also exist, such as that between each of the three constituents and the characters portrayed, I will focus here primarily on the bonds connecting the elements of the trinity.

The first constituent part of the trinity that I will explore is, in many ways, the most indefinable of the three: the audience. While the definition of audience is a highly problematic endeavour in Audience Reception analysis, my focus here is on a conjectural audience. Additionally, since the members of the trinity operate in relation to one another, I will not study the audience as an independent entity, but rather the audience as it relates to the fictional world of the stage; in other words, the puppet/puppeteer-audience relationship.

The link between the audience and the world of the stage has been a source of debate throughout the history of dramatic theory, and the inclusion of

the puppet figure to this already perplexing partnership leads to many complications. At a basic level, it is a question of the audience's role in the construction of the fictional realm onstage. For several puppetry scholars, the explanation can be extrapolated from Samuel Coleridge's oft-cited concept of the willing suspension of disbelief. In his work Biographia Literaria, Coleridge introduces the term as such:

> My endeavours [are] directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing suspension of disbelief* for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. (Coleridge, 168-9; my emphasis)

While Coleridge's original use of the term refers to the relationship between reader and literary work rather than audience and stage, dramatic critics who support a mimetic model of theatre have embraced the term. For those who ascribe to this notion of the theatrical audience, the spectator enters into a kind of mimetic contract in which he or she chooses to overlook the artifice and accept the representation onstage as the reality of the moment.

When applied to puppetry, the willing suspension of disbelief intensifies. Eileen Blumenthal claims that "in puppet theater, this so-called 'willing suspension of disbelief' becomes a high-wire act as the gap between normal reality and stage truth becomes a chasm" (Blumenthal, 71). In other words, while the audience of live-actor theatre need only overlook the disjuncture between

actor and character, the puppet theatre spectator must make the imaginative leap both to accept the inanimate as animate and then to see that figure as the character it performs. In this scenario, puppet theatre makes similar demands as live-actor theatre, but the puppet's demands are substantially greater. Ultimately, as in mimetic live-actor theatre, the audience is charged with a temporary acceptance of representation as reality.

The difficulty of Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief as applied to puppetry is twofold. First, the term's adherence to the mimetic model defines theatre as an imitation of reality, presupposing a dominant naturalistic aesthetic that in many ways runs counter to puppetry's figurative quality which will be discussed later in this chapter. Second, willing suspension of disbelief connotes an implicit hierarchy which dissolves the equality of the puppet-puppeteer-audience trinity. Insofar as the audience need only suspend disbelief and passively accept the reality presented to them onstage, the term privileges the performer above the audience as the sole creator. Coleridge's use of the term 'poetic faith' is telling in this regard; like a congregation before a powerful minister, the audience trusts in the sermon without question or individual action. By applying Coleridge's literary term to puppet theatre, the egalitarianism of the trinity is lost and replaced by a vertical hierarchy. Thus while the willing suspension of disbelief provides a useful foundation to understanding the puppet/puppeteer-audience dynamic within a mimetic model, a more refined conception of the spectator must be developed.

In order to situate the audience as an active and equal component of the puppeteer-puppet-audience trinity, its involvement needs to be defined not as poetic faith, but rather as imaginative play. Indeed, in their association with both children's theatre and often children's dolls as well, puppets are even more suitably situated than the live actor as impetuses for the audience's imagination, a matter that will be explored later in this chapter. The process of play, however, is not limited to the childhood experience. As J. Huizinga suggests, play represents a cornerstone of our culture that may be identified in a multitude of human interactions and initiatives, from legal proceedings to the process of art. Regarding the latter, Huizinga states that "The eternal gulf between being and idea can only be bridged by the rainbow of imagination" (133). Like the willing suspension of disbelief, a bridging effect across two mutually exclusive concepts must take place. The gap between the stage world (fiction) and the real world (reality) needs to be temporarily filled in order to allow the audience to engage with the piece. While this bridging analogy works in both the Coleridge and Huizinga scenarios, the idea of play and the metaphor of the game is drastically different from that of poetic faith in terms of the audience's participation in the event. The spectator becomes a player, and the strict distinction between the world of the stage and the world of the auditorium is collapsed into a more mercurial world of the game.

Just as dramatic critics relying on Coleridge's model stress the importance of an audience willing to accept the world of the stage, Huizinga emphasizes the acceptance of the implied rules of the game setting. However, if we are to

consider the audience as players in the theatrical game, we must appreciate that the spectators are themselves expected to actively participate by following the rules. According to Huizinga,

> Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it "spoils the game", robs it of its character and makes it worthless. (10)

Far from the chaos of imagination often associated with play, Huizinga identifies a strong need for structure within the game itself. Thus specific rules exist and must be followed by all participants, including those leading the game. In the theatrical sense, the role of the game's instigators is filled by the performers; the performer onstage might shape the rules of the game, just as the referee forces the players to abide by the rules of the sporting event, but he or she is not above the rules. Maintaining character, for instance, might be a rule that a performer in a realistically-based production must abide by, while the audience must similarly refrain from breaking the illusion by talking, taking to the stage, etc. It is therefore not a question of blind faith, but rather of participation based on the strict rules set by the event, the participants, and the conventions of the game itself.

Alongside this adherence to the rules is the creation of a community of players. Again, this notion challenges the hierarchical structure of Coleridge's

faith-based metaphor, instead creating a sense of complicity in which all participants, even if their roles are distinctly different, hold equally important places in the structure of the game. This sense of togetherness is clearly demonstrated in Huizinga's description of the spoil sport:

> The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a "spoil-sport". The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its *illusion*...Therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community. (11)

Unlike Coleridge's reader who operates on a very personal level, suspending his or her *own* disbelief, the player belongs to a defined community. The connection here to the theatrical event is evident—not only the performers, but the audience as well exist as part of this community of believers.

In the reception of a piece of art, play can manifest itself in the process of imaginatively filling in that which is missing, a concept explored in the relationship between reader and text by reception theorist Wolfgang Iser. In his 1978 The Act of Reading, Iser suggests that

> the author and the reader are to share the game of the imagination, and, indeed, the game will not work if the text sets out to be anything more than a set of governing rules. The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play. (108)

Thus, the act of reading becomes an act of play, engaging one's imagination in order to "animate the meaning of the text as a reality" (Iser, 129). The reader participates in the process of calling into being that which cannot exist otherwise, fulfilling the challenge set forth by the author. The relationship is cooperative, not competitive, in which the meaning of the text is brought forth by the reader engaging in the game outlined by the author.

The role of the reader in the game involves his or her negotiation of what Iser calls blanks. Fundamentally absences and thus indefinable by nature, these blanks exist in between that which is known in the text. In perhaps his most lucid example, Iser uses the serial novel to illustrate one possible function of the blank; faced with an unfulfilled expectation, the reader attempts to "imagine how the story will unfold, and in this way [he or she] heighten[s his or her] own participation in the course of events" (Iser, 191). Audience reception theorist Susan Bennett easily extrapolates this kind of blank to a theatrical setting in the form of the intermission, similarly interrupting the action and prompting an act of ideation on the part of the audience in which possible scenarios are explored in the interim (Bennett, 44). However, notable breaks in the action are not the only place in which Iser's blanks exist. More significant in relation to the

puppet/puppeteer-audience bond, blanks exist throughout the text wherever the 'good continuation' of the story is jeopardized. The reader naturally strives for consistency, and thus searches for connections in the text even when those connections are not explicitly identified as such. Like all game-play, this choice to fill in the blanks is a voluntary one, and one that might be rejected at any point in the reading process. If the reader chooses do so, blanks add order to the chaos of the text, allowing the reader to follow the rules and fill them. These blanks

> make it possible for the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader to be balanced out, for they initiate an interaction whereby the hollow form of the text is filled by the mental images of the reader. In this way, text and reader begin to converge, and the reader can experience an unfamiliar reality under conditions that are not determined by his own disposition. (Iser, 225)

Once again, the hierarchy of author/performer is toppled in favour of a more equal scenario in which all participants play different but equally meaningful roles. By filling in the blanks, the reader becomes capable of a hermeneutic understanding of that which is not a part of him or her, thus bridging the chasm between the work and the receiver.

While Iser's blanks clarify the role and actions of the audience, they can also help us approach the second of the three major elements, the puppet. In the puppet theatre, Iser's notion of blanks can be extended as a metaphor for the puppets themselves. Just as the blanks in a text unite the author and reader in the process of meaning-making, so too does the puppet bring together the puppeteer

and the audience in an act of character creation. The lacks associated with the puppet—the principal one of which is its lifelessness—is overcome by the puppeteer's manipulation of the object and the audience's act of imaginative play which instils the moving object with life. This act of co-creation perpetrated jointly by the audience and the puppeteer—in which blanks are continuously deliberately filled—represents one of the most fundamental elements of puppetry's appeal. As Burkett attests, "The puppeteer gives the puppet movement and voice, but the audience gives it breath…So the theatricality of the medium is that both sides have to work to make it come to life, and when that happens it really is magical" (Qtd. in Brennan). The puppeteer provides the motion enabling the puppet to perform, while the audience creates good continuation by attributing life to the lifeless but animate figure.

The act of filling the blanks in this instance, however, does not altogether erase the blanks that exist. That is, although the audience bestows life onto the inanimate, they can never fully overcome the lifelessness that interrupts the illusion of the stage world. Rather, the audience finds itself perpetually aware of *both* parts of the puppet's composition: the corporeality of the inanimate object and the signified life attributed to it. Steve Tillis terms this awareness "double-vision," a construct that is present in all puppet theatre and which "creates in every audience the pleasure of a profound and illuminating paradox provoked by an 'object' with 'life'" (Tillis, 65). The paradox, or tension, created by the object/life dichotomy creates a stronger bond between spectator and puppet. By wilfully attributing life to what they know to be inanimate, the audience makes a

huge imaginative leap and thus invests more in the character than is perhaps possible in typical live-actor theatre.

The suggestion that puppets demand more investment from an audience than living actors points to a fundamental difference between a puppet and an actor. According to Baird, the understanding of a puppet as a mirror image of a human being is essentially flawed:

> Whatever the end result, puppets are not little men, women, or animals. A puppet must always be more than his live counterpart—simpler, sadder, more wicked, more supple. The puppet is an essence and an emphasis. For only in this way does a puppet begin to reflect the truth. When puppeteers try to copy the human animal, they fail. Live actors do it much better. The mechanical copy of life may be amazing, curious, or even frightening, but it doesn't live, whereas the *suggestion* contained in a puppet may be full of life. (15)

This notion of the puppet's essentialization and signifying power creates a counterpoint to the mimetic dependence of Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief. For Baird, the puppet is not an imitation of reality; rather, within the backstage controls of the puppet stage, the *realité suspendue* of the puppet world is both its own, as well as, inevitably, the representation of another. While a similar duality exists with the live actor, in the marionettes' world the inanimate nature of the *actor puppet* creates, paradoxically, a more controllable and, perhaps, purer signifying moment. Theatre artist Edward Gordon Craig suggests

in "The Actor and the Ubermarionette" that puppets surpass live actors in their precision and artistry. Craig claims that in applauding an actor, "we are applauding his personality, *he* it is we applaud, not what he is doing or how he is doing it; nothing to do with art at all, absolutely nothing to do with art, with calculation, or design" (70). The encroachment of the actor's personality onto the role, as alluded to in Craig's controversial quotation, is completely avoided in the puppet, which is itself devoid of personality. In a semiotic sense, this absence of personality diminishes the issue of superfluous significations that a live actor might carry with him or her. Semiotician Peter Bogatyrev suggests that "the movements of the puppet actor are pure sign of a sign" ("Semiotics," 48), emphasizing the puppet's liberation from other sign systems such as those of human actors. Whereas human actors bring their own histories to any role they play, the puppet is typically created explicitly for that character and exists to serve no other purpose. In theory, the lifelessness of the puppet allows the audience to read it as a sign rather than a human being which cannot be read as such (Bogatyrev, "Semiotics," 48). The puppet is simply the character, perfectly realized.

Bogatryev's assessment has often been echoed by practicing puppeteers who equate their craft's appeal with the puppet's unique ability to exist only as the character it has been created to convey. This generalization, however, does not apply to the numerous variations of puppets that exist. Specifically, the plethora of artists who cast found objects in their performances are ignored by Bogatryev's assessment. Akerlund's tomato Macbeth, for instance, brings with it

the cultural significations of the object itself, forcing the audience inevitably to question the reasons behind the artist's choice of material much in the same way that audiences recall actors' past productions and personal lives. Still, the freedom of the artist to choose his materials, and thus his cultural significations, with such precision, exists most concretely in the puppet theatre where only the imagination limits the realization of the character.

The absence, or controlled presence, of superfluous significations ironically allows the puppet to operate on various levels of meaning; in other words, allegorically. The puppet's allegorical dimension is twofold. First, the image of the marionette has been allegorically linked to the plight of humanity for centuries. In reference to the infinite power of the Prime Mover, Aristotle proclaims:

> All that is necessary is an act of his will—the same as that which controls the marionettes by pulling a string to move the heads or the hands of these little beings, then their shoulders, their eyes, and sometimes all the parts of their bodies, which respond with grace. (Qtd. in Baird, 38)

The idea of humans being at the mercy of the whims of a larger force, whether it is a god or a less definable universal power, is dramatized in the image of the powerless marionette whose strings are pulled by the manipulator above. Second, and more broadly, the puppet itself is an allegorical entity. Defined by Bernard Dupriez, an allegory is a "literary image in which the relationship between vehicle and tenor applies not globally, as in simile or metaphor, but element by element,

with accompanying personification" (21). That is, the subject of the allegory (tenor) relates to the object of comparison (vehicle) in a variety of ways, as opposed to the often singular point of comparison in related literary images. Likewise, the puppet is an inanimate object linked allegorically to the living entity it represents and personifies through its movement. This disjuncture between the subject and object of comparison, or the signifier and signified, opens a new dimension for meaning in the space between the two, allowing the puppet to represent the abstract in addition to the concrete character attributed to it. Russian puppeteer Sergei Obraztsov, for instance, believes that "[o]n the stage, a man may portray another man but he cannot portray man in general because he is himself a man. The puppet is not a man and for that very reason it can give a living portrayal of man in general" (17). The oblique reference to the universality of humankind that Obraztsov recognizes in the puppet constitutes one example of the power of the puppet's allegorical nature to expand the potentiality for meaning-making. While the live actor's additional and unwanted significations force the audience to see it as a person rather than a sign, the puppet's existence as pure sign of a sign allows for divergent meanings to be attributed simultaneously to the animated creation.

Finally, the puppet maintains a unique connection to the concept of play previously discussed in this chapter as the foundation of the audience's relation to the performance. The puppets' resemblance to dolls, along with their contemporary association with children's theatre, causes them to evoke images of

childhood, play, and imagination. For some, these associations act as hindrances in the adult puppet theatre. Bogatyrev, for instance, submits that

> It is natural that children respond to puppet theater more intensely than adults. Their training for interpreting the signs of puppet theater is on a higher level of development than that of adults who have already forgotten the meaning and emotional colouring of many of these signs. (Bogatyrev, "Contribution," 62)

Indeed, children are perhaps more finely tuned to play than adults, but to suggest that they respond more intensely diminishes the potentially powerful responses of adults to puppet theatre. Rather, puppetry is singularly positioned as an art form that can elicit childlike response—that is, those evoked by play and imagination—from predominantly adult audiences. Puppeteer Michael Meschke beautifully describes this connection to the childlike state of mind, stating that there is "something childish, innocent and moving about holding up a puppet and claiming that it is something. And asking others to believe it [as] well. This is one of puppet theatre's distinctive characteristics: its naïveté" (122). The innocent, transformational quality of play allows for a deeper connection between all facets of the performance: audience, puppet, and puppeteer all participate in the life-giving process.

The naïveté referred to by Meschke calls into question the puppet theatre's ability to provoke critical analysis. At first glance the puppet seems to be the ideal instrument with which to create theatre that produces Bertolt Brecht's famous alienation effect, through which the audience is sufficiently distanced

from the action they see before them and thus able to think rationally about the issues addressed. According to Brecht,

> once illusion is sacrificed to free discussions, and once the spectator, instead of being enabled to have an experience, is forced as it were to cast his vote; then a change has been launched which goes far beyond formal matters and begins for the first time to affect the theatre's social function. (451)

As an inanimate signification of that which is animate, the puppet appears to be uniquely capable of this shattering of illusion alluded to by Brecht. Since the puppet is obviously not a living being, any story told through it should produce an alienating effect that prevents the audience from becoming involved to the point of losing themselves in the story. However, this is not the case. Through the process of co-creation, the audience is entrusted with the task of breathing life into the animated object, and in doing so paradoxically invests more into the illusory world of the stage than would an audience of a typical live-actor performance. Indeed, the puppet theatre generally encourages audiences to overcome Brechtian alienation, promoting instead an emotional investment akin to Aristotle's catharsis. Often considered the polar opposite to Brecht's alienation effect, catharsis is introduced by Aristotle in The Poetics when he defines tragedy in part as a play "with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions" (49). Thus the purpose of the play is not to ignite social debate, but to allow spectators to experience difficult emotions as a means of safely purging them from the individual.

While catharsis seems more apropos to puppet theatre than the alienation effect, a third possibility, falling between the two extremes, describes the audience's experience as both a critical and feeling mass. When a child plays with a doll, he or she transforms the object into a living being through which various concepts may be explored in a safe environment. A child who plays house, for instance, experiments with his or her own understanding of parenthood by creating its own imaginative parameters and enacting a version of parenting in the unthreatening environment created by play. The emotional bond between a child and his or her toy is undeniable, but it is through this attachment that the child is enabled to investigate the world around him or her. Similarly, puppet theatre carries with it an implied sense of safety, allowing audiences to grapple with controversial issues in a playful format. As a pure sign of a sign, the puppet is theoretically uncontaminated by experience or bias, connecting it more strongly to the exploratory freedom of childhood than the culturally layered adult existence. This perceived harmlessness of the puppet has paradoxically imbued it with the ability to lead audiences to consider debates or concepts that would otherwise be untouchable. The lack of puppet theatre censorship even in countries whose other arts have been strictly regulated are exemplary of this phenomenon: in nineteenth century Spain, for instance, shadow puppet plays were allowed during Lent while all other dramatics were banned (Blumenthal, 167).

Clearly, the bond between audience and puppet is a complex one which relies on a variety of factors. Yet while the audience and the puppet are essential to the experience, they do not constitute the entirety of the puppet theatre trinity.

The puppeteer is always a critical third component, providing the movement and often the voice that allows the audience to imaginatively bring the puppet to life. In contemporary puppetry, this component is often accentuated when puppeteers choose to remain visible during the performance, dwarfing the puppets with their own flesh-and-blood frames. According to Baird, the trend emerged in North America in the 1920's because while "Veteran puppeteers wouldn't have been caught like that, without a drape to hide behind,...the young ones didn't know any better, and that is often the genesis of progress" (229). The goal of this presence is certainly not uniform amongst all puppeteers: while some strive to deemphasize their presence, others accentuate their own persona as an integral part of the performance. Regardless of the intent, however, a puppeteer's visibility is always recognized by the audience and changes the dynamic of the puppet show.

The implications of this choice are clearly enormous, and hotly debated within the puppetry community. With the puppeteer as an active and visible component of the production, the puppet's relationship to its manipulator becomes an important factor for consideration. For Meschke, the puppet acts as an instrument of the artist, necessary to the artistic whole but subservient to the puppeteer's control and vision (Meschke, 17). Like a great musician, the puppeteer cannot create his art without his instrument, but, barring any technical problems with the instrument, it is ultimately the artist alone that is responsible for the success or failure of the performance. Henryk Jurkowski takes a different tack in defining the relationship between the visible puppeteer and the puppet.

Jurkowski provides the following definition as one possible relationship between puppet and puppeteer:

> the puppet as partner of the actor, who is visibly manipulating the figure onstage. The puppet is the mobile picture of this character, the actor giving to it his voice, feelings and even his facial expression…In this case the actor has replaced the puppet player, quite a new situation. (39)

Jurkowski's astute observation reveals another layer to the puppet production with a visible operator. In the case of Burkett and many others, a single puppeteer manipulates a multitude of puppets and characters, lending movement and voices to all. Thus, in order to understand the puppeteer's contribution to the performance, we must understand him not only as an actor but, more specifically, as a monopolylogist.

The monopolylogue, so dubbed by Michael Peterson in his Straight White Male, occurs when a single performer revises the traditional monologue structure by performing several voices, either consecutively in sequential monologues or simultaneously and in dialogue with one another. Like the conventional monologue, says Peterson, the monopolylogue inherently poses to its audience the question "Why are you listening?" (5). The answers, as it turns out, are strikingly similar to the explanation of puppetry's appeal. In particular, both forms force the audience to bridge a significant gap between what is signifying (the puppet or the solo performer) and what is signified (the living creature or multiple characters), demanding a similarly substantial filling in of the blanks. The major difference

arises in the link between the signifier and the signified in these two cases. In the monopolylogue, the performer's body becomes a canvas on which various identities are written, but also through which the characters are read. Unlike method acting that stresses the figurative submersion of the actor beneath the façade of the character, the monopolylogist is always visible. The omnipresence of the performer has two practical results. First, the spectator must read the characters through the performer who acts as a mediator, layering the spectator's own history and personality onto the character. Second, since all characters are performed by the same body, an unspoken unity between the various identities is expressed. It is due to this second result that Jill Dolan suggests, "the monopolylogue form seems particularly suited for investigation as a site of utopian performatives because it models the fluidity of cultural identities and offers a method through which performers and spectators might experience them" (67).

The decision by the puppeteer to make his/herself wholly visible, and thus create a performance style not unlike the monopolylogue, has been widely discussed by puppeteers, as has the effect of this decision on an audience. Although puppeteers approach their own visibility differently, some highlighting their presence and others striving to understate their involvement in the performance, a visible puppeteer always draws focus in a way that a hidden one will not. In essence, there are two performances taking place simultaneously, and the ways in which those two performances intersect is key to the experience of the puppet production. For some, the presence of the performer is meant as a sort of

exercise in reverse psychology. Famed American solo artist and puppeteer Bruce Schwarz says,

> I keep the mechanics out in the open because I don't want people to pay attention to them....My theory is that watching me move the puppets with my hands will become dull after a little while. When it does, the puppets will be more interesting than I am. (Qtd. in Tillis, 132)

Here, the appeal of the puppet is perhaps naively privileged over that of the performer, whose visibility exists only to lay bare the secrets of manipulation that might otherwise distract the audience from the action. Jurkowski, on the other hand, charges the puppeteer's visibility with the "rising passivity of the puppet" in which the puppeteer becomes privileged over his puppet (Jurkowski, 81), and Meschke speaks of a certain amount of competition between puppeteer and puppet that has the potential to derail the production (Meschke, 62). Just as Schwarz's confidence in the puppets' ability to completely overshadow the performer is naïve, so too does the suggestion that the performer's presence enforces passivity upon the puppet devalue the power of the co-created life imbued in the puppet by the puppeteer and audience. Alternatively, solo puppeteer Vladimir Sokolov's image of the relationship between the two is that of a mutually respecting exchange. He suggests that

> As man transfers himself into his wooden puppet and makes it obey his orders—so it happens that man submits to the puppet's own being. The puppet obeys his imagination and submits to him,

and at the same time, by its obedience, he submits to the puppet. (Qtd. in Baird, 17)

Although this quotation does not discuss the audience's perception of the puppeteer/puppet relationship, the underlying sense of cooperation between puppet and performer creates a much more harmonious picture than the previous commentators' visions. Indeed, while a tension between artist and puppet will invariably arise given the simultaneity of the two distinct performance styles, Sokolov suggests that the tension need not be antagonistic. The game-world created by puppet theatre does not need to pit the trinity's constituents against each other, but rather allow them each to play their own unique parts in the whole.

Unlike the audiences' negotiation of the object/life dichotomy of the puppet in which the spectator chooses to instil the figure with life in spite of their knowledge of it as an inanimate object, the tension between the performer and puppet allows for a combination of the best traits of each. By having the puppeteer present and active in the performance, a unity is created between the diverse characters he portrays through the very nature of his monopolylogue-like performance. But the inclusion of the puppets, also representing the characters which the puppeteer enacts, deemphasizes the puppeteer's role as a mediator between the audience and the character. This ability to remove the characters from the performer's body is rarely discussed, but is very important to our understanding of how audiences engage with the puppets onstage. One powerful example emerges not from a work of puppetry, but rather from a solo performance by Michael Kearns. In Kearns' Intimacies (1990) and More

Intimacies (1992), a scarf is used as the sole prop to distinguish between the various characters Kearns represents onstage. Worn alternately as costume pieces representing a priest, a black female prostitute, an IV drug user, and so on, the scarf comes to represent a common image outside of Kearns' body which highlights both the differences and similarities of his various HIV positive characters. At the play's conclusion Kearns leaves the scarf onstage while he exits, and the audience's final image of the night is "the lit red scarf, the referent of the identification between the performer and the character...leaving the audience to speculate on their own identification with the scarf now that Kearns no longer is associated with it" (Roman, 129). Though a prop rather than a puppet, the affect of the scarf on the audience reveals one powerful way in which the intersection of monopolylogist/puppeteer and puppet might give birth to a new performance form. The puppet acts as a vessel outside of the actor's physical body in which the character may be encapsulated, once again creating a less hierarchical mode of charactization as in the case of Iser's blanks.

In this chapter, I have explored the intricacies of the adult puppet show from three perspectives: the implied position of the audience, the significance of the puppet figure, and the addition of the visible puppeteer/monopolylogist. Far from passive, the spectator is implicated as an active player in the game-world established by the puppeteer, thus creating a trinity of spectator, puppeteer and puppet which brings about the performance. The puppet exists as a lack or blank and, consequently, as a uniting force which draws together the performer and the audience in an act of joint creation. By negotiating the life/object tension, the

audience engages imaginatively with the performance and connects with a childlike naivety to the characters portrayed. These characters exist more purely than any character performed in the live-actor theatre by virtue of the puppet's lack of extraneous signification, creating a character that is at once singularly specific and a symbol for all humanity. Through the inclusion of the visible puppeteer/monopolylogist, the audience's experience is again split between two distinct but intrinsically connected performances, and in the process connections between the characters, the performer, and the audience are even more fully realized. In the next chapter, Ronnie Burkett's 1994 play Tinka's New Dress will be investigated as one example of puppet theatre that engages adult audiences in a way that breaths new life into old themes, characters, and stories.

CHAPTER 2: TINKA'S NEW DRESS

In examining the impact of Ronnie Burkett's unique performances upon his spectators, his 1994 spectacle Tinka's New Dress is a logical starting point. As mentioned in the Introduction, Tinka represents a dramatic departure from his earlier work as well as the beginning of his rise to international celebrity. The elaborate production featuring 36 marionettes also marked Burkett's first conscious foray into the world of politically charged puppetry, developing the bitingly satirical style that wove the impish irreverence of Burkett's earlier work with a more mature desire to communicate to and with his audiences. In Tinka, Burkett harnesses the power of his form to engage his audiences in a game in which the traditional boundaries of performer and spectator, real and unreal, performance space and auditorium are bent and surpassed. In doing so, Burkett is able to comment on the position of art in society and the perils of conformity in a unique way. Burkett skirts an interesting line between detachment and emersion, proximity and distance that leaves the audience emotionally charged yet critically aware of the material presented onstage.

In Tinka, Burkett weaves a powerful fable about freedom, art, and radicalism in a society that values conformity and obedience. Inspired by the wartime puppet shows of famous Czechoslovakian marionettist Frank Skupa, Tinka tells the story of Carl, a young puppeteer eager to baulk at the oppressive regime through his politically charged puppetry. Like Skupa, who secretly performed his so-called Daisy Plays during the Nazi occupation of

Czechoslovakia during World War II, Carl strives to alert his fellow citizens through his puppetry to the tyranny of The Common Good, a seemingly faceless organization with a frighteningly absolute authority over society. In spite of his mentor Stephan's objections and his sister Tinka's concerns, Carl persists in his increasingly political puppetry, wielding Stephan's traditional Franz and Schnitzel marionettes in his delinquent puppet shows performed at the transvestite Morag's club just outside of the city limits. Through the interactions of the lascivious clown Franz and innocent elfin counterpart Schnitzel as well as the supporting cast of Stephan's puppet shows, Carl lambastes the government with a playful ferocity that eventually leads to his exile with Tinka to an internment camp outside of the city for his disobedience. As the play progresses, Carl's former colleague Fipsi turns her aptitude for puppetry to the creation of propaganda for The Common Good, making a name for herself while those relegated to the ghetto of the camp, including Morag and Carl, are gradually exterminated. The play ends with Stephan and Tinka agreeing to continue Carl's fight in the face of The Common Good, choosing danger in freedom over safety in conformity.

The fable's larger themes of governmental oppression and the fear associated with straying from the fold can be easily applied to a variety of historical events. The obvious connection is Hitler's fascist regime under which the original Daisy plays were created, but other interpretations are easily made: one reviewer, for instance, called the show a "magic-mirror version of America today" (Feingold). However, in the time and place of its inception, Tinka's most immediate parallel was the AIDS crisis sweeping North America. Burkett readily

acknowledges the impact of AIDS on the maturation of his work, saying that "Suddenly I was seeing people dying, and dealing with real-life issues: Who's going to walk so-and-so's dog this week? You watch an 18-year-old die. I couldn't keep it out of my work....I guess I became an AIDS activist by default" (Nunns). While this activism is more pronounced in Street of Blood, the fate of those deemed too radical for The Common Good's tastes suggest a kind of segregation evident during the AIDS scare. Burkett recalls, "When AIDS first hit, I remember political discussions in Edmonton going on about special farms for the infected. It all comes from intolerance and hatred of diversity and we're seeing ethnic cleansing all over the world again. It continues" (Koentges). Common Good supporter Isaël describes those living in the Camp as "[t]he freaks who contaminate us" (Burkett, Tinka, 70), perfectly encapsulates the attitude that Tinka and Burkett's other works fight against. Ultimately, Tinka is about the courage to be different in the face of oppression, striving to enlighten others through art to the folly of mindlessly following the majority.

The politics of the piece are admirable, but the story is not particularly unique, and indeed smacks of a certain melodramatic simplicity that arguably threatens to engulf it. For some, Tinka fails to rise above its shortcomings. Adrian Chamberlain of the Times-Colonist in Victoria, British Columbia published an unenthusiastic review in 1997 levelling criticisms that have haunted Burkett throughout his rise in popularity. Chamberlain condemned the play for its unevenness, self-indulgence, sentimentality, sluggish pacing, and unnecessary length, adding that while the puppets were clever and innovative for the first half

hour of the over-long show, one would need to "really love puppets" in order to enjoy the evening. While Chamberlain's dismissal of Burkett's work on the basis of his own dislike for puppet theatre does tend to discredit his review, much of his criticism has been oft-repeated by others. The Ottawa Citizen's Janice Kennedy, for instance, also bemoaned the pacing and length of the intermissionless show, going so far as to suggest that Burkett's form hinders his message because "[t]he audience is too much aware of the artifice, the once-removed characterization, to submerge itself in the subtle interplays of dark and troubling concepts" (Kennedy, "Theatre Review"). This awareness of artifice speaks to the tensions between the audiences' emersion in the fictional reality and the alienating presence of pretence visible in the very form of puppetry. As Kennedy's comment elucidates, the distance created in Burkett's work has the potential to distress audience members who expect a degree of illusion associated with traditional realist theatre. In Huizinga's terms, the spectator clinging to the rules that govern a similar but fundamentally different game cannot engage in the new game and run the risk of acting as the spoil sport.

The majority of critics and audiences, however, embraced Tinka's charm. Tinka was showered with praise and awards in practically every leg of its worldwide tour. At home in Alberta, Burkett's play swept Edmonton's 1998 Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Awards with five wins including best play and best performance by a leading actor, the latter marking perhaps the first time that a self-proclaimed puppeteer received such an honour in North America (Blakey). The rest of Canada's theatre community recognized Burkett's accomplishment

with a Chalmers award for playwriting (1994) and two Dora Mavor Moore Awards in Toronto for set and costume design (1996), while the UK expressed their love for the show with a Beckett award and a Best International Production Award in Dublin (1998). This admiration from both critics and the public was repeated in the 2002 Melbourne performance, which secured for Burkett an Age Critics Award. The New York run earned the esteemed praise of The Village Voice luminary Michael Feingold, who extolled Burkett as "one of the world's geniuses." Undoubtedly owing in large part to Feingold's high opinion of the show, people lined up at the box office toting hand painted signs that read "I need Tinka Tickets" and exhibiting a "general air of desperation" (Nicholls, "Burkett buffo"). An Obie Special Citation and a place on the cover of The New York Times attest further to both the play and puppeteer's popularity (Nicholls, "Burkett buffo"). Incidentally, supporters were quick to rush to the show's defence when negative reviews emerged. Chamberlain's review did not escape backlash: Gilbert Reid dubbed his critique "a thunderously inept review" (Reid, 10) and in April of the same year, Chamberlain was playfully awarded a Golden Groaner Award for "worst review given by a critic in town" by Vancouver's theatre community at the Golden Glynnies (Gibson). In spite of valid critiques lodged against the show, Tinka elicited powerful positive responses from many of those in its audiences. It is not Tinka's flawlessness that captivates audiences; rather, it is in its roughness that its charm may be found. As one reviewer aptly suggests, "Tinka was far from subtle, yet there was something intrinsically appealing about this mongrel piece of art" (Scott).

This appeal arises in large part from Burkett's skilful synthesis of the audience's reality and the fictional reality of the performance, a choice that can be detected even before the show proper begins. As soon as the house is open, a series of recorded announcements detailing the various practices encouraged or discouraged by The Common Good is piped into the auditorium. For instance, one announcement asks that "[f]or The Common Good, please have your identification card available for inspection at all times. Thank you. This has been a message from The Common Good" (Burkett, Tinka, 2). These announcements effectively set the tone and suggest that the world of the play extends into the auditorium and beyond the confines of the play's duration. Both performance time and performance space stretches farther than the stage and the inherent ephemeralness of the performance. Through this playful conflation of the fictional world and the real world, the audience is surreptitiously cast as citizens of Burkett's imaginary universe as well as agents in the production.

This commingling of reality and fiction continues in the opening moments of the show. As Burkett enters the playing space, he notices first the carousel set and then a free-standing figure beside him. This figure, referred to as Mother in the text, is one of seven such puppets, collectively representing The Populace. While they each possess distinguishing characteristics by which they are identified—a little boy and girl, a thin man and woman, a fat man and the mother—they are uniformly neutral, lacking any individuation in colour or expression. The act of moving these figures into their opening positions for the show proves to be Burkett's first order of business. Only after these figures are in

place does Burkett introduce Stephan, an aging puppeteer played by an intricately designed marionette that walks among The Populace and interacts with the neutral figures: "Thank you all so very much for coming. The puppets and I appreciate the generosity of your applause, and your pockets" (Burkett, Tinka, 3). Like the final announcement from The Common Good, this opening line seems to refer both to the characters in the show and to the audience. As Gilbert Reid suggests, "[i]n Burkett's transmutation of 'real' and theatrical space, the audience comes to identify itself as these mute viewers and, as the dolls disappear, to feel themselves *filling the gaps*, becoming the audience Burkett's protagonist requires to hear his political message" (Reid, 9; my emphasis). In these neutral figures, we see a striking example of the theatrical physicalization of Iser's blanks. Just as literary blanks interrupt the good continuation of the text, the puppet's lifelessness jars the continuation of the theatrical illusion and must be filled by the audience. The abstract nature of The Populace, however, raises the stakes of the audience's involvement: that is, spectators must not only bring the figures to life, but complete their unfinished images in order to situate them properly within the imagined reality.

If Reid's assessment is accurate, the audience members furnish the mute figures with personality by assuming their position, recognizing them as mere stand-ins for the living spectators themselves. At the same time, the lack of individuation in these characters has an interesting significance: like the audience in a darkened auditorium, these nameless and faceless figures retain complete anonymity and seem to lack any kind of agency. If the audience does indeed

recognize its affinity to these characters, they might also recognize their own inertia. These figures do not move in the way that the marionettes do; in fact, Burkett's stage directions refer to them as figures rather than puppets or marionettes. The faceless crowd has even less power to action than the inanimate marionettes. Similarly, the fact that Burkett's first act onstage is to move "from figure to figure, moving them to their opening positions" (Burkett, Tinka, 3) is not insignificant here; as the audience projects themselves to the faceless figures and Burkett manipulates the figures around the set of his fictional world, the collapse of the divide between stage and auditorium is palpably performed. Burkett's power to manipulate or 'move' his audience in the figurative sense is demonstrated literally.

While this theory explains the initial interplay between the puppet and the audience as instigated by Burkett, it does not fully explain the intricacy of Burkett's manipulation of the murky boundaries between fiction and reality. That is, the audiences' projection of themselves onto the stage as The Populace is but one aspect of the game in which spectators are expected to partake. Not only is The Populace attributed life by the spectators, the principle marionette characters of Carl, Tinka, Stephan, Morag, and the rest must be imbued with life as well. As discussed in Chapter 1, the process of co-creation allows for a dual perspective for the audience: they recognize the marionette as inanimate and lifeless while at the same time joining the puppeteer in actively infusing life into the puppet. In Tinka, Burkett highlights this dualism in his performance style, drawing attention to the marionettes' lack of agency by positioning them within full view on the

carousel while they are not part of the performance. Likewise, Burkett's omnipresence as the larger-than-life manipulator reminds the audience of the tension between real and imaginary in the world they have created. As Reid suggests, the puppets onstage seem life-sized before Burkett is introduced into the world as the play begins (Reid, 8).

The significance of the audience-puppet bond intensifies as the play's primary theme is revealed; that is, the critique of conformity and rejection of any individuality that strays from the norm. Hettie, a controversial writer who ultimately meets her end at the anonymous hands of The Common Good, aptly summarizes the play's key sentiment: "believe me honey, all the fun people are outcasts" (Burkett, Tinka, 45). The drag queen Morag likens the plight of those in the internment camp to that of the Biblical Jezebel, "an outsider. A foreigner. A scapegoat. Thrown to the street as mere dogfood. With each passing day, I begin to understand the old girl a bit more" (Burkett, Tinka, 48). However, while the plight of the individuals in the play speak strongly against the oppressive force of conformity, the call to individuality is also mirrored in the play-within-the-play; namely, the four performances of The Franz and Schnitzel show. Interspersed with the main plotline of the human characters' struggles to survive on the outskirts of society, these extended sequences of Franz the lascivious clown and Schnitzel the elfin creature who longs to fly provide Burkett with a dynamic tool with which to "bring the struggle of the artist as commentator vividly to life and relate directly to the audience… [to give] the struggle of Carl and Tinka within the play a deeper resonance for those watching their journey" (Burkett, Tinka, ii).

In three of the four Franz and Schnitzel segments, the elements of traditional folk puppetry are powerfully recalled: bawdy comedy, political satire, audience interaction, and improvisation in the tradition of Skupa's World War II Daisy Plays and or England's Punch and Judy hand puppet shows form the basis of these segments. Performed by Burkett-cum-Carl, the content of these sketches mirror Carl's growth as a radical: the tone of the first sequence is harmlessly light and comical, but later sequences acquire an undercurrent of increasingly desperate politicization. Burkett's audience finds itself deliberately cast as the audience of this play-within-a-play and, what is more, forced to shed the safety of mere voyeurism in favour of active participation in the game-world of the puppet theatre.

Burkett's role in these sequences in particular and in the performance in general deserves consideration at this point as an integral aspect of this active participation. It is in keeping with contemporary practice that Burkett chooses to be entirely visible to his audience as he manipulates the marionettes, but the choice also lends significance to the story itself. While Burkett is visible throughout, the audience's focus is meant to shift to the puppets. This is not to say that Burkett's presence is to be ignored; on the contrary, reviewers comment on "The lovable Burkett" (Christofis), referring to him as "A gentle giant of a man" (Middleton) who moves the marionettes with a tenderness that implies real respect and affection. To complicate the relationship, Burkett performs Carl during the Franz and Schnitzel puppet show, and is dressed in Carl's costume throughout. In Reid's biographical criticism of the piece, this costume choice

allows Burkett's "own politics, his own sexual orientation, his own construction as an artefact of theatre [to be] revealed as he transforms his doll into himself and himself into a doll" (Reid, 10). Carl does in fact become an extension of Burkett: a young puppeteer struggling to break with his own stylistic choices and say something of worth to his public. Just as The Populace is performed both by the neutral figures and by the living audience, Carl is performed both by the Carl marionette(s) and by Burkett, thus crossing the *realité suspendue* of the play and its puppets, and the physical reality of the puppeteer and his audience. Carl is portrayed by both the puppet, with its propensity for allegory, and a human being which, according to Bogatyrev, cannot be read as a pure sign. The convergent meanings of Burkett's human body and the divergent meanings of the puppet's allegorical existence meet, allowing for a multifaceted reading of Carl as human and individual as well as representative of the show's larger themes. Carl is a character performed by and connected to Burkett, but also represents individualism and resistance.

Insofar as the audience gains an affinity to Carl (and, at the same time, Burkett) through Franz and Schnitzel, it is the improvisational root of these sketches that lies at the heart of the audience-puppet/puppeteer connection. Freed from the confines of a script, Burkett is permitted to fully test and manipulate the dynamics of the relationship. Naturally, the openness of these sections also creates an interesting challenge in terms of careful analysis, since no complete record exists of a single, specific performance. Still, although the published text does not illuminate the countless variations in performance, it does provide a

template "based upon a general format that has evolved through performance" (Burkett, Tinka, 19). Thus a close reading of the published text tempered by examples of variations taken from numerous individual performances based on reviews and interviews with Burkett himself will provide a useful frame through which to understand the impact of Franz and Schnitzel.

As discussed in Chapter 1, puppet theatre often provides artists with a safe platform from which to sharply critique contemporary political and social realities. In the case of Tinka's New Dress, Burkett must play within an interesting tension between the fictional world and the real world in order to address issues relevant to his audiences. The audience has unknowingly been cast as the spectators of Carl's Franz and Schnitzel which, in the world of the play, is vaguely situated in early 20th-century Europe. However, the audience's frame of reference clearly does not encompass a detailed knowledge of this period's political, social, and artistic reality. Rather than adhering rigidly to the fictional reality created onstage, Burkett chooses instead to reference current concerns of his contemporary audiences. The topical improvisation usually takes the form of one-liner quips, such as Schnitzel's gibe at the expense of Unidentified Human Remains (1989) playwright Brad Fraser: coming across a skull on the stage of one Toronto performance, Schnitzel commented, "Oh, an unidentified human remain. It couldn't belong to the playwright. Otherwise it wouldn't fit on stage" (Dafoe). On other occasions, particularly pertinent public debates could dominate the framework for the entire Franz and Schnitzel improvisation. Another performance of Tinka in Toronto, for instance, coincided with the election results

of the 1995 Quebec referendum. The result was an instant sense of community and relevance for the entire theatre:

> we had a full house and nobody knew the results because they were just coming in and the whole show was about Franz and Schnitzel breaking up the show and *separating* but still sharing the stage but Franz wanted Schnitzel to pay for everything because he was unique and distinct…it was one of those moments where you went, 'OK, we're actually talking about something here…It's all allegorical but everyone is actually waiting to get out of the theatre to hear the election results. (Burkett, Personal interview)

By opting to address current events in the improvised sections of the show, Burkett once again unites the fictional world with the reality of the spectators, thus blurring the strict distinction between stage and auditorium. Though some spectators inevitably find this collapse of time periods unsettling as it challenges the illusion they have helped to establish, audiences for the most part embraced the references to the mid-90s within the early 20th-century setting of the play. The conflation of reality and fiction had, after all, been introduced as a technique within this production before the show began, when The Common Good announcements seemed to reference a fictional world where identity cards are held by all citizens while at the same time referring to the theatre and the audience as part of that world. The rules of the game, so to speak, had been laid out, and the audience was invited to play along.

In addition to the sense created by the improvisation that the performer and spectators exist in the same time and space where satirical mockery of contemporary society may be enjoyed equally by both parties, this improvisation also creates a performance situation in which no semblance of a fourth wall exists. No script divides the spectator and the performer, dictating what will be done next without any regard to that night's particular crowd. Rather, Burkett's improvised performance becomes an ephemeral piece of theatre created by relying on the composition, mood, and reactions of the specific audience in the theatre to shape the piece. The relationship is not unidirectional; audiences can consciously shape the performance by the kinds of feedback they extend. For Burkett, the will of the audience is a palpable entity onstage:

> there's something about a full house just daring you to go further, and when it works, [sic] it's like an orgasm…lots of foreplay and everybody going 'ah, ah' and then this burst where everyone's satisfied [and] you just want to have a smoke with the audience afterwards. (Burkett, Personal interview)

The risk of going too far, of taking the joke beyond the admittedly extreme limits that the puppet show provides into territory that genuinely offends, adds even more to the bond between performer and audience, thus enhancing the emotional proximity between the two. Any risk, however, comes with its pitfalls; sometimes, says Burkett, "you cross the line and it falls flat, [and] you're blamed. They're not blamed" (Burkett, Personal interview). Thus the equalization of performer and audience created by the improvisation is a fragile entity: when the

performance crosses the fine line from risky to offensive the hierarchy is abruptly restored, with the audience disavowing any role they may have had in the proceedings. Community is destroyed, and the performance suffers as a result. Audiences refuse to buy in, and become wholly separated from the production.

While improvisation allows for alterations in the show based on the audiences' collective feedback, it also provides the performer with a freedom to invite participation from the spectators. The improvised humour of Franz and Schnitzel allows the audience to let their guard down and embrace their active role. Laughter itself is, after all, one of the most common and least intimidating forms of audience participation, as well as a wonderful emollient for controversial political messages. As the drag queen Morag tells Carl before his first show, "make the bastards laugh. That way, they won't know you've said anything important until it's too late" (Burkett, Tinka, 15). Laughter has the potential to share puppetry's unique ability to both involve the spectator in the production and distance them from it in an oftentimes critical manner. As Alan Reynolds Thompson professes, "For the play of laughter a certain degree of detachment on the part of the spectator is necessary, since in order to laugh we must be able to see the absurdity of the action by contrast with past experience" (811). That is, humour springs from a conscious or unconscious comparison of the action onstage with the reality of the spectator's situation.

Laughter constitutes a mild form of audience participation, but Burkett pushes his audiences far beyond the safety of this conventional method. The most glaring example of this invocation of the audience as part of the show can be seen

in the formidable character of Madame Rodrigue. In the first Franz and Schnitzel sketch, Schnitzel frets over this larger-than-life figure's early entrance because "[w]hen the fat lady sings, you know what happens. It's over!" (Burkett, Tinka, 26). Charging the audience with the responsibility to prevent Madame Rodrigue from singing, Schnitzel exits and Madame enters, immediately chastising the audience for failing to greet her properly. What follows is a lengthy education session in which Madame teaches the audience how to react to her arrival onstage, including lines to be uttered and simple actions to be performed. After each new element is introduced to the routine, Madame asks that audience members practice them, and "[d]epending on how well (or poorly) the audience participates, Madame will either commend them on their effort, chastise them accordingly, or single out specific culprits to stand up and do the action solo" (Burkett, Tinka, 31).

There is, of course, a danger in engaging audiences this aggressively. As Burkett acknowledges,

> Some places in North America just didn't get Madame Rodrigue at all, which some nights just made me go, 'ooo I'm just gonna bully you until you do applaud'—not always the best thing. Some nights she would go on for 25 minutes and the show would just run forever, because I had no taste and no limits and no sense, admittedly. (Burkett, Personal interview)

Singling out individual audience members and forcing spectators to comply with the demands of the performer risks mutiny, spectators totally disengaging from

the production in protest of being unfairly bullied. Likewise, as Burkett suggests, this direct relationship between spectator and performer can also inflate the performer's sense of entitlement, leading to a commitment to achieving the desired complicity at the expense of the show as a complete entity. Proximity between puppet/puppeteer and the audience threatens to dissolve in the audiences' reluctance to comply with the new rules of the game.

Still, enormous potential exists in this inclusion of the audience in the action of the show. By calling on the audience to perform, Burkett dramatizes conformity within his audience while also highlighting individuality within that group. Typically, spectators shrink from demonstrations of themselves as individuals within the mob; one popular example is the spectator's reluctance to laugh at a moment they individually find funny if the rest of the audience is not reacting likewise. By threatening to single out those who do not perform, Burkett ironically forces audiences to behave in a way that would normally make them stand out, but does not yet fully challenge their desire for conformity. That is, Burkett encourages an atypical response from his audience that they must accept in order to retain their anonymity. If an individual chooses to cling to the traditional role of the audience by sitting quietly in the dark, there is a danger that they will lose their position as a member of a group and be singled out as an individual. This process of eliciting responses from the audience both emphasizes the traditional need for anonymity and reveals the new rules of the game. The spectator who complies with Burkett's marionettes' demands participates in a kind of group-individuality, in which the norms are subverted but the anonymity

of being a member of a larger group is not lost, thus making the act a safer one. At the same time, a bond is created with the rest of the audience who are likewise being harassed by the performer. Not only does the spectator feel connected to the performer, but to his or her fellow spectators as well. In this case, community does not equate to conformity: the audience joins together to resist the conformity of theatrical tradition, just as Tinka's outsiders resist The Common Good. To this point, however, the spectators have been allowed to do so in the safety of numbers.

After developing this relationship between the Franz and Schnitzel and the audience in the first two play-within-a-play sketches, Burkett dramatically alters the formula in the third sketch. Rather than a subversively comic Franz and Schnitzel show performed by Carl, this sketch is a blatant propaganda piece performed by The Common Good-sanctioned puppeteer and Carl's former colleague, Fipsi. Here, the by-now-familiar characters are usurped as mouthpieces for The Common Good, creating a brief, dry sketch in which Franz convinces Schnitzel that he does not really want to be a fairy:

> SCHNITZEL. But Franz, if I'm not a fairy, what am I?
>
> FRANZ. You're a worker, Schnitzel! For The Common Good!
>
> SCHNITZEL. Really? That sounds important!
>
> FRANZ. It's the most important thing there is, Schnitzel.
>
> Works makes you free! (Burkett, Tinka, 73)

The far-from-subtle use of the Nazi slogan *Arbeit macht frei* (Work makes you free) further emphasizes the sinister message Franz and Schnitzel have been

appropriated to promote. Similarly, by stripping Schnitzel of his innocent urge to fly, the audience is robbed of the endearing quality that draws them to the character in a child-like and emotional way.

At the same time, the carefully constructed trinity of puppeteer-puppet-audience is severed here by the introduction of a fourth element. Rather than manipulating Franz and Schnitzel directly, Burkett controls Fipsi's marionette whose wide hoop skirt opens to reveal a miniature marionette stage and backdrop beneath her dress. The mini-marionettes of Franz and Schnitzel are manipulated by Fipsi, and while Fipsi introduces the performance by directly welcoming the audience to "another performance of our beloved statesmen, Franz and Schnitzel," neither Franz nor Schnitzel speak directly to the crowd during their brief time onstage (Burkett, Tinka, 72). The audience finds itself impressed by Fipsi's miniature marionette performance, but this kind of spectacle runs counter to the intimate simplicity of the earlier Franz and Schnitzel performances. The transition from folk puppetry to propaganda puppetry is dramatized, revealing a disquieting sketch stripped of its folk elements completely. The audience is infinitely distanced from the proceeding, a fact physicalized by the distance of the marionette from Burkett himself.

Shortly after this tarnished version of the Franz and Schnitzel show, Carl gives his final performance of his version of Franz and Schnitzel. More than anywhere else in the show, or indeed in Burkett's oeuvre, audiences' reactions to this final sketch epitomized the power of puppet theatre even when performed for

a solely adult audience. Schnitzel takes a step downstage towards the audience and confesses that

> ...the closer I get, the more I realise that...well, the more I feel...what I mean to say is...Oh this is too weird. I can't look at you and tell you!
>
> *He runs upstage and buries his face in the back curtain.*
>
> That's better. What I wanted to say, is that...
>
> I love you.
>
> *Pause.*
>
> Well, don't feel like you have to say it back or anything.
>
> *To date [2002], there has been only one audience wherein no one has yelled back "I love you too." Usually many, several, or just one brave soul will blurt out their affection for Schnitzel. It is pure magic.* (Burkett, Tinka, 90)

Indeed, when audiences did feel compelled to yell 'I love you' to Schnitzel, it was often an almost involuntary action. One spectator in Germany, a recent graduate from a Berlin puppetry school, admitted to Burkett after the show that while his initial reaction to Schnitzel was to discredit him as a Disney-like character that represented everything wrong with North American puppetry, he found himself shouting 'I love you' to the puppet at the end, much to his own surprise (Burkett, Personal interview). In the entire history of Tinka's touring performances, only a handful of audiences did not express their love for Schnitzel. In the rare performances when the 'I love you' was withheld, Schnitzel would say something

along the lines of, "Wow, you're the first audience that didn't tell me you loved me. But I know you can't be brave. I know you're afraid" (Burkett, Personal interview). Afterwards, Burkett received letters from members of these audiences apologizing for their lack of personal bravery and confessing that they did indeed love Schnitzel.

The response elicited by Schnitzel's leading confession is not wholly unique in theatre history. In James M. Barry's 1904 hit Peter Pan, this convention is stretched further with results not unlike those of Burkett's Schnitzel. After the fairy Tinkerbell drinks poison in order to save Peter, she tells him that the only way she might be saved is if children believe in fairies. Distraught, Peter calls out "Do you believe in fairies? Say quick that you believe. If you believe, clap your hands!" (Barry, 136-7). The ensuing stage directions reveal the expected response: "Many clap, some don't, a few hiss…but Tink is saved" (Barry, 137). These reactions, in fact, become part of the rules of the game.

Like Burkett's Schnitzel, Barry's Tink puts the onus of the show's progression on the audience. If at least some members of the audience do not clap, Tink cannot be brought back to life. Still, key differences emerge. While Schnitzel's fate is far less dire, his request for the audience is more involved. The show can proceed without the 'I love you,' but the dynamic of the proceeding show changes drastically. The other major difference between the Peter Pan response and the response to Tinka is that of the audiences' ages. While Burkett will not permit spectators under the age of 14 into his shows, Barry's audiences would have combined children and adults alike. According to Tracy Davis,

"Peter Pan encouraged a gut-level response from children and reversion to childhood from adults" (76). While the children found themselves caught in the moment, Davis continues, adults recognized the pretence but clapped rather to express "solidarity with the young" (77). Clearly, this is not the case in Tinka, where the involuntariness of the reactions suggests a gut-response from the exclusively adult crowd. As Burkett articulates, characters like Schnitzel are meant to show audiences that "it's ok to feel innocent and to have a childlike response as well [as experiencing the adult plotline]" (Burkett, Personal interview). In the absence of children spectators, Burkett's adult audiences are able to embrace the seemingly naïve response exemplified in the Peter Pan example. In this case, the childlike entering into the game structure of the play constitutes part of the experience, and thus a stepping stone to understanding.

The involuntariness of these responses and the sense of personal responsibility expressed by those who did not say 'I love you' perfectly encapsulates the potential impact of the process of co-creation as discussed in Chapter 1. The act of infusing life into the inanimate creates a bond between spectator and character that prompts reactions impossible to duplicate in live actor theatre. As Burkett admits, "if I went out onstage no matter what I did no one is going to yell out 'I love you Ronnie'" (Burkett, Personal interview). In solo performance, even, the audience may respond to a performer's request out of compassion for the performer if they are aware that the success of the show depended on the response, but the reaction to Schnitzel is decidedly different. Spectators do indeed "blurt out their affection for Schnitzel" (Burkett, Tinka, 90).

The familiar and disquieting reality of social oppression present in the piece may prompt audiences to buy into the action in an emotionally charged way, but the profession of love for Schnitzel arises predominantly from the tenants, or rules, of puppetry itself. The process of bringing the character of Schnitzel to life is so powerful that the audience has imbued him with emotions that might be hurt if they do not respond in kind. Said one Calgary reporter, "The audience reaction to that character [Schnitzel] is nothing short of spiritual connection" (Scott).

The powerful bond forged through the act of co-creation and the safe environment of exploration created by the play-world of the puppet theatre have stunning implications for the audience members involved. Through their role as part of the puppeteer-puppet-audience trinity and their role in the show itself, audience members are able to literally experience a contained microcosm of the larger issues of the show. As spectators of the current, relevant, funny, risky folk puppet theatre play-within-a-play, the audience experiences the power and relevancy of the free speech which Carl strives to protect. More importantly, however, the audience's interactions with the play-within-a-play cast, particularly Schnitzel, allow them to playfully and safely explore their own willingness to resist conformity. The spontaneous 'I love you too' in particular allows spectators to break theatrical convention and expectations of adult theatregoers by publicly expressing affection for a puppet. The guilt expressed by some audience members who do not respond in kind is indicative of the self-exploration inherent in the process. One Australian reviewer pinpoints the charm of the show, stating

that, "Like children we are liberated by the diminutive 'play' of these little people, but they also convey a powerful and timeless morality tale" (Thomson).

Of course, the impact of the show does not exist solely in the Franz and Schnitzel segments. On the contrary, one reviewer commented that "the audience's response was also freely given in spontaneous murmurings and little sighs and gasps throughout the performance. We cared deeply about these little people and the ideas and feelings they expressed" (Middleton). Indeed, it is more than possible to engage the audience in the process of co-creation and thus promote a sense of union between puppet and spectator without the addition of the Franz and Schnitzel folk theatre elements, but in the case of Tinka these elements clearly enhance the relationship. The impact of Franz and Schnitzel is twofold: first, by eliciting such a strong reaction with the character of Schnitzel, Burkett primes the audience for a similar if not equally powerful connection to the other lifeless puppets in the show, encouraging the act of co-creation in general. Second, by allowing the audience to experience their own struggles with the tension between conformity and individuality, the much more severe plight of the characters whose lives depend on a similar struggle becomes all the more touching and real.

In fact, while Franz and Schnitzel elicit the most powerful individual responses, Carl seems to emerge as the uncontested focus of the piece. Performed by both Burkett and a marionette, Carl is omnipresent onstage, recalled by Burkett's costume even when he is technically absent from the scene. As Franz and Schnitzel's manipulator, Carl is uniquely tied (or, more accurately, connected

by strings) to Schnitzel, the character for whom the audience demonstrates the most powerful emotional response. It is Carl who risks his life, somewhat rashly, for his political and artistic beliefs. Although, as Stephan observes after Carl's floundering attempt to convey his convictions to Hettie, "his militancy is still somewhat embryonic" (Burkett, Tinka, 8), Carl's passion is unmistakable. Yet the title of the play shifts the focus away from the rabble-rousing puppeteer, pointing instead to his sweet and innocent sister, Tinka. According to Burkett, "at the heart of Tinka's New Dress is Tinka. Not Carl, not Fipsi, but Tinka....It actually is those pretty basic, level characters that are the central focus for me....that's why you can go off on extremes." (Burkett, Personal interview). This foregrounding of Tinka, both in the title and in Burkett's own assessment of the piece, acts as an anchor through which the radical characters are grounded. While difficult topics are discussed and outrageous characters are introduced, Burkett maintains that the core of his work is innocence, humanity, and faith. The game-world created by Burkett is one of inclusion and safety in spite of the adult themes. By inviting the audience directly into the world of the play (and the world of play), Burkett allows spectators to literally experience the story and explore their own relationship to it, much as a child tests his or her notions of the world around him or her through imaginative play. Yet while the child remains largely unaware of or uninterested in the differences between imagination and reality, the adult audience recognizes the strangeness of its connection to the imaginary world but embraces it nonetheless. It is this wilful and conscious

engagement in the emotional world created by Burkett that paradoxically allows for the self-discovery associated with the characters he wields.

CHAPTER 3: STREET OF BLOOD

In the second instalment of the Memory Dress Trilogy, Burkett's aesthetics diverge significantly from those of his first foray into the world of politically-savvy, meaningful puppetry. While the magic of Tinka emerges primarily from the dynamic interplay between puppeteer/puppet and the audience, Street of Blood emphasizes another relationship within the trinity: that of the puppeteer and his puppets. According to Martin Morrow, "[w]ith Street of Blood there was no longer any question that Burkett had made a rare transition. He wasn't a puppeteer anymore. He was a remarkable playwright and actor who just happened to use puppets" (322). The distinction likely arises partially from the unspoken devaluation of puppet theatre as separate from and less than so-called legitimate theatre; labelling Burkett as a solo artist first and foremost removes the stigmatization of the puppeteer that mainstream theatre seems to promote. Thus the flippancy with which the puppets themselves are treated in Morrow's observation undervalues the contribution of the 34 strikingly realistic marionettes deftly manipulated by Burkett. However, the shift from puppeteer to solo artist does highlight Burkett's increased presence in the production, both through the text and physically throughout the performance. Far from overshadowing the power of the puppet, Burkett's emphasis on his role as monopolylogist/puppeteer allows for a unique mixture of life and imagined life onstage. The encroachment of the physical human body on the artificial puppet world and the prioritization of the puppet-puppeteer relationship create a tension

between the real and the imaginary that plays out onstage rather than between the stage and the audience, positioning the audience as a more speculative, but no less essential, element of the production.

Street of Blood premiered at Winnipeg's Manitoba Theatre Centre in 1998, geographically and temporally well-situated to reflect growing concerns both in Western Canada and country-wide. The Red Cross tainted blood scandal, an issue central to the climatic finale of the show, was reaching its largely unsatisfactory conclusion in March of that year. The Canadian federal and provincial governments pledged $1.2 billion to compensate the approximately 28,600 Canadians who had received the hepatitis C-infected blood via blood transfusions between 1986 and 1990, leaving the estimated 20,000 Canadians who had contracted the virus before or after those years without recourse. Gay rights, homophobia, and the collision of religious beliefs with the two were also making headlines that year as the lengthy legal case of Vriend v. Alberta came to a close. Delwin Vriend, a gay man whose sexuality had led to his dismissal from the Christian college at which he taught, won the seven-year battle with the province of Alberta. The Supreme Court of Canada found that the Individual's Rights and Protection Act, Alberta's provincial legislature akin to the national Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, was at fault for its omission of sexual orientation as a category of discrimination. The 1998 verdict was a landmark victory in the quest for equal rights for gays and lesbians in Canada, setting an important precedent for future discrimination challenges. In spite of its reputation for ultra-conservatism, Alberta was being forced into a dialogue with its own prejudices.

It was in this politically-charged landscape that Burkett's new play took to the stage. Characterized by Burkett as "a big, sprawling, gothic prairie epic" (Qtd. In Morrow, 322), Street of Blood defies succinct summarization. Country bumpkin Edna Rural pricks her finger on her quilting needle and sees Christ's face in the blood on her quilt. Her adopted son Eden, a self-defined queer radical who has been bombing gay haunts in an attempt to organize the queer community against the crusading Christian Right, returns to Turnip Corners to find his birth mother. He hopes to discover that his real mother is Esmé Massengill, a Hollywood icon and, unbeknownst to Eden and the rest of the town, a vampire. She and her entourage have come to town to perform a musical and secretly collect clean blood from the townsfolk, a venture that the recently-returned Jesus tries somewhat ineffectually to discourage. Eden learns the truth about his conception, the result of the brutal rape of Cora Jean Pickles, and ultimately dies at the hands of Esmé. Esmé is vanquished by Jesus, and in an uncharacteristic act of defiance Edna berates the deity for allowing her husband, her son, and herself to be sacrificed. She finally admits aloud that her husband Stanley died of AIDS after receiving infected blood through a transfusion, and that he had unknowingly passed the disease on to her. Yet the show ends with a dose of Edna's infectious optimism as she chooses to leave Turnip Corners for the big city and triumphantly drives off into the prairie horizon.

In exploring the relationship between Burkett and his marionettes within the puppeteer-puppet-audience trinity of Street of Blood, various parallels between Burkett and the characters he manipulates immediately emerge.

Although Burkett has been cryptic about the level of autobiography present in the piece, Morrow and others have been quick to suggest that Street of Blood represents Burkett's most personal play to date (Morrow, 322). The setting of small town Alberta, depicted iconically by the prairie skyline mural that dominates the set, directs attention to Burkett's own upbringing in Medicine Hat, Alberta. Endearing Edna, an enigma full of both ignorance and genuine benevolence, grew out of a character partially based on Burkentt's own mother which he developed years before. Finally, the parallels between Burkett and Eden are easily drawn: both are adopted, queer sons of rural Albertan parents who left home to become performers, though Eden's volunteer hospital/lounge act routine pales in comparison to Burkett's international celebrity. Still, despite the similarities, Burkett is careful to distance himself from the charge of autobiography. Referring to a violent scene of parental abuse in Street of Blood, Burkett cheekily tells one reporter, "my father never beat me when I was wearing my mother's wedding dress" (Koentges). In fact, Burkett is very close to both of his adoptive parents, and maintains that, while there are parts of him in all of the characters he creates, none are without their fictional embellishments. The differences between Burkett and his characters are as important as the similarities: by imbuing the puppets with histories both like and unlike his own, Burkett establishes a bond between himself and the animated objects while distancing himself as well, avoiding the pitfalls of purely confessional theatre.

Burkett's unique relationship to his characters, who are at once part of him and separate from him, is interestingly dramatized in a Brechtian moment of

concord with his most personal character. When Eden explains his reasons for bombing an alternative high school in his quest to frighten and organize the queer community, Burkett breaks character to acknowledge his own personal experiences:

> EDEN. I knew what my third target would have to be. There's a small alternative high school, and they had a program for gay kids. Kids who had really suffered in the mainstream system. And it was something the community had fought and worked for a long time, because, well, let's face it man, we all remembered high school.
>
> *Ronnie pauses, looks straight out to the audience and remembers.*
>
> RONNIE. Fucking high school. (Burkett, Street, 38)

A similar relationship between performer and character can be seen in Tinka's New Dress in the form of Burkett's portrayal of Carl, uniting the two in a concrete way. However, the implied parallel between Burkett and Carl, both artists using puppetry to make a political statement, is illustrated only obliquely, whereas Burkett's intervention in Street of Blood is explicit and pronounced, uniting the fictional world of the puppets to the real world of his own personal experiences. Similarly, Burkett's break from character both separates him from Eden as a unique entity ('Ronnie') and unites the two in their shared experience.

Aside from the self-referentiality, Burkett's presence as a performer takes on myriad manifestations. Most immediately striking is Burkett's physical position in relation to his puppets. Whereas Burkett's previous work saw him on

deck level, moving through the scenes with his marionettes, Street of Blood breaks with convention by placing Burkett on a bridge three feet above the puppets. The normal division between Burkett and the puppets is exaggerated, thus further challenging the audience's negotiation of the tension between the monopolylogist/puppeteer and the marionettes on the deck. As one reporter suggests,

> On one level, it is impossible not to be awed by the dexterity and talent of the master puppeteer, as he works the strings from above with only the help of a stage manager to put things in position; on another level, there are huge stretches of the show where the characters are so alive, so convincing, that they seem to be acting on their own. (Friedlander)

Yet while the presence of the three-foot bridge physically separates Burkett from his marionettes' world, Burkett is paradoxically more present than he was in Tinka. Rather than double-casting himself as one of the marionette characters as he does in Tinka, Burkett takes the opportunity in Street of Blood to perform characters for whom no marionettes have been created: Stanley Rural, Cora Jean Pickles' rapist, and Jesus.

In the cases of his portrayals of both the rapist and Stanley, Burkett's role onstage allows for the dramatization of a level of violence that would be difficult to reproduce in the theatre of live actors. The stage directions describing the rape scene clearly articulate the brutality that Burkett is able to convey:

> *Ronnie yanks the toque onto his head and jumps down off the bridge, standing in the alley between the SL side tower and the SL bridge. He is the man. As the music reaches its strange, violent crescendo, he grabs the puppet. There is a scream—Cora Jean's—and he covers her mouth. Saturated red light and music peak as Ronnie thrusts forward. He releases Cora, spits on her, quickly climbs back on the bridge and removes the toque.* (Burkett, Street, 79)

The sheer difference in size between the two characters emphasizes the grossly mismatched power dynamics, highlighting the helplessness felt by the rape victim. Similarly, the image of Burkett committing these atrocities, the creator of these creatures whom he generally handles with loving care, evokes the betrayal of a creator who turns on his creations. The long tradition of the marionette as an allegorical image for humanity as it is controlled from above by God, Fate, or a similarly omnipotent force only heightens the connection evoked. In a society in which images of violence are normalized, this sense of betrayal is able to provoke a visceral response that can be difficult to achieve in realistic theatre in which the audience has grown used to the conventions and desensitized to their effect.

As Stanley, Burkett evokes a similarly powerful reaction towards the violence depicted, but in this instance the response arises from his skilful manipulation of object/life dichotomy. In a memory sequence that explains the strain between Eden and his now deceased father Stanley, the latter arrives home to find young Eden playing house with his friend Ogden. Ogden plays the

husband and Eden the wife. Upon seeing his son wearing Edna's wedding dress, Stanley's fears of his son's sexuality are confirmed, and he reacts with a brutality that has been hinted at earlier in the play, but left unrepresented until now:

> STANLEY. Come here.
>
> Young EDEN. No…
>
> *He starts to move.*
>
> STANLEY. I said come here!
>
> *Ronnie grabs the strings of the marionette and violently pulls the puppet of young Eden up to his level.*
>
> Look at you. Look at…this. Eden, the spoiled fruit!
>
> Young EDEN. Daddy, no! Please Daddy!
>
> *Music sting. Short, brutal, loud. Young Eden is "thrown" down to the stage level, bent over the chair and facing upstage, revealing the bloodstained back of the wedding dress.* (Burkett, Street, 55-6)

By pulling Eden upwards by his strings, Burkett violently disrupts the audience's negotiation of the object/life dichotomy by abruptly emphasizing the marionette's existence as an object at the expense of the life instilled into it by the performer and the audience. Burkett's careful handling of the marionettes to this point encourages the audience to engage in the process of co-creation. Likewise, because the marionettes are such beautifully-crafted humanistic figures which Burkett moves around the stage as realistically as possible, the audience easily attributes human characteristics to the puppets. Although still aware that the marionettes are inanimate objects, the audience is led by Burkett to focus

primarily on their imagined life. By momentarily destroying the reality of the world that the audience and puppeteer have so far created in which the marionettes are treated and viewed as living beings, Burkett emphasizes the violence enacted upon Eden physically, mentally, and emotionally. The audience has no time to readjust their negotiation of the tension between object and life, and the result is a brief moment in which the violence enacted upon a marionette feels as though it is being enacted upon a living, breathing creature. It is this manipulation of the audiences' expectations that allows for what National Post reviewer Robert Cushman called "the most terrifying embodiment of paternal oppression I have ever seen on a stage" ("Compelling").

The final non-marionette character that Burkett chooses to perform is perhaps his most ambitious. When Edna sees Christ's face in the blood on her quilt, Burkett speaks to her as Jesus from the bridge, the tight spotlight on his face marking his first encroachment into the world of the puppets. When Street of Blood was originally conceived, Burkett had no intention of playing the character of Jesus:

> I was going to make a puppet of Jesus and I thought well, I don't want to make Sunday School Jesus, I don't want to make The Last Supper Jesus, because maybe that's not how everyone sees Jesus ….[T]he easiest, cheapest, most economical piece of vocabulary would be to put the light [on my face], and then He doesn't look like anybody's version of Jesus, so we just go, "that's Jesus." (Burkett, Personal interview)

Interestingly, the typical strength of puppetry to shed superfluous significations operates in reverse in the case of Jesus. While a marionette rendering of Christ would be capable of capturing the iconic imagery of what Burkett terms Sunday School Jesus with a perfection virtually unparalleled on the live-actor stage, it is that very attention to detail that carries with it centuries of implications. Burkett's Jesus is a new conceptualization of the Son of God, and this variation from the norm is apparent from the moment the light illuminates Burkett's face while the strains of the Techno Jesus theme music is heard. Later, Eden acknowledges the change in the image of Jesus:

> EDEN. I'm just used to the beard and long hair, okay? That looked good. Real good. I used to have such a crush on you. You were so hot. Well, him. That Sunday School Jesus. But this aging club boy thing doesn't really work on someone your age.
>
> JESUS. I forgive you for that Eden. I thought I'd try a new image.
>
> EDEN. Keep working on it, honey. (Burkett, Street, 50)

Burkett acknowledges the iconography that he is drawing upon, but undercuts it with the comedy he infuses into the scenes as well as the acknowledgement of the man behind the image: in this case, aging club boy Burkett himself.

While the non-marionette characters provide the most explicit example of Burkett's presence as a crucial element of Street of Blood, the most striking contribution of Burkett's heightened role in the piece is its link to the show's underlying theme. Of course, amid vampires, the Second Coming, musical numbers, and snippets from Esmé's Hollywood films, it is difficult to extricate

Burkett's theme from his convoluted plotline. In fact, while the political issues of the play are both controversial and, during the original run of the production, timely, the play resists the urge to act as an ideological mouthpiece. Rather, as in Tinka, the appeal of Street of Blood lies largely in the genuineness of its characters and the relative simplicity of its core storyline: that of a prairie family struggling to come to terms with the various differences that have divided them. According to Burkett, "at the heart of Street of Blood is Edna Rural. Not a vampire, not a gay terrorist, it's Edna Rural" (Burkett, Personal interview). With Edna as the focal point of the show, Street of Blood becomes fundamentally a story about the courage to accept changes of the future and come to terms with the pains of the past. The ultimate message of Street of Blood is unifying, emphasizing the similarities between the characters over their many differences. Both the written text and the performance text convey this theme. Perhaps the most compelling example of the textual and theatrical unifying of characters can be seen in the intersecting monologues of Eden and Edna.

Although Edna and Eden seem in many ways to be polar opposites, they are often paired in the script. The revelation that Stanley's death was the result of AIDS, for instance, is achieved through an oscillation between these two characters' monologues, providing the full story by switching between the two perspectives. Not only have they shared experiences, however, the two also share less tangible markers of identity. Both Edna and Eden marvel over Esmé's fantastic costumes, revealing very different things about the two characters while establishing a connection as well. Eden says that he spent much of his time

watching Esmé's movies admiring her clothes, marvelling that "Even playing a spinster from Bumfuck U.S.A. she looked fabulous! Listen to me. I can't believe I just used the word 'fabulous.' It's so fag hag" (Burkett, Street, 11). Meanwhile, Edna reminisces about the homemade wedding dress fashioned after Esmé's in 'Passport for Love,' admitting that "I was still just lumpy Edna. But when I put on that dress, well, didn't I just feel like a princess" (Burkett, Street, 33). The dress represents romance and femininity for Edna, reinforcing her sexuality much in the same way that it does Eden's.

The bond between the two is suggested in the text, but powerfully reinforced by the presence of Burkett as a monopolylogist. As discussed in Chapter 1, the monopolylogue promotes a fluidity of constructed identities in which the underlying humanity of the characters performed is dramatized by the stability of the performer's presence. That is to say, although Burkett changes his voice, mannerisms, and style of speech for each individual character, it is always a variation of his voice that we hear. Through Eden and Edna's differences, it is possible to see the fundamental essence that unites them, highlighting the show's thematic core. The unity associated with the characters in the play may be understood as yet another trinity in Burkett's work. Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost of Christian dogma are understood to be at once distinct and part of a cohesive whole, so might Burkett's characters exist as distinct but intrinsically connected. In fact, Burkett's play devises a notable parallel to the Christian trinity: the father (Stanley), the son (Eden), and the Holy Ghost (Jesus), the three most influential characters in the life of Edna Rural.

At the same time, this union of characters allows Burkett to challenge the dichotomy of good vs. evil. Whereas Tinka's oppressor, The Common Good, remained offstage throughout, personified only by the disembodied announcements and followers like Fipsi and Isaël, Eden's powerful patriarch graces the stage in the form of Burkett himself. United through Burkett's body, Stanley shares the same essential core as his various fellow characters. The connections between the characters dramatized by the unifying foundation of Burkett's body allows even those characters who function as villains to possess redemptive qualities. Stanley, for instance, is not the embodiment of oppression as is The Common Good; in fact, Mr. Rural is involved in one of the most tender moments of the show. As Edna recalls her husband's reaction to the news that she could not conceive a child, Burkett mimes Stanley's response:

> EDNA. He set something down on the bureau, walked over to me and tied an apron around me while I sat. Then he took what he had set on the bureau and put it on my lap. I looked down and there was a plate. Bacon and eggs. He knelt down, took a piece of bacon in his fingers, and held it up to my mouth. That's when we looked at each other. We stayed there for a long, long time. Me in my wedding dress and an apron, Stanley on his knees before me. Me and my man. Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Rural. Crying over a plate of bacon and eggs.

[Ronnie] ends on his knees, embracing young Edna. (Burkett, Street, 35)

The memory of Stanley, the quintessential silent and reproachful patriarch, is laced with as much tenderness as it is ignorance and anger. Like loveable Edna, who is still able to "succinctly embod[y] all the contradictions of the provincial character" (Morrow, 319), Stanley is allowed the dimensions of a rounded character rather than being pigeonholed as the archetypal narrow-minded oppressor.

The prioritization of the relationship between puppet and puppeteer reveals several interesting dynamics that this relationship may produce, but the third component of the trinity, the audience, must not be forgotten. As in the case of Tinka, Street of Blood was widely acclaimed, captivating audiences both in Canada and beyond. The show toured to New York, England, Stockholm, and Scotland and garnered honours including a Chalmers Canadian Play Award (2000), six Dr. Betty Mitchell Awards (1999), and a GLAAD Media Award for outstanding New York Theatre (2001). At the same time, the show met with staunch criticism, including one New York critic who went so far as to accuse Burkett of misogyny and another who indicted him with the charge of proselytizing for the Christian church (Szalwinska). Unlike Tinka, whose critics seemed fairly uniform in their complaints, Street of Blood drew quite varied complaints from its audiences. The most obvious reason for the shift is, of course, the content. Far more topical and controversial than the abstract Common Good, the themes of AIDS and homophobia might have been less palatable for

many audiences, and certainly more open to attack. Similarly, the show's relevance to Canadian audiences may have lost some of its edge in foreign cities, particularly in America where audiences were unfamiliar with the Red Cross tainted blood scandal. However, a significant amount of the backlash may also be traced to the onus placed on the audience as a third, vital component of the production's success.

For Burkett, the American leg of the tour, while commercially successful, produced the least receptive audiences. Indeed, despite the fact that the show played to houses at 95% capacity in the same off-Broadway theatre that premiered Rent, Burkett stopped touring to the United States after the Street of Blood experience. By way of explanation for the removal of America from his touring schedule, Burkett suggests that he experienced a lack of cohesiveness in the American audiences that hindered the impact of the production (Burkett, Personal interview). From this observation, it becomes clear that a sense of community is essential to Burkett's aesthetic. The trinity of puppeteer-puppet-audience clearly differs from the seemingly similar trinity of puppeteer-puppet-spectator; the rules of this game require the third element of the event to metamorphose into a team rather than a collection of individuals. If the spectator attempts to extricate himself or herself from the collective group of the audience, he or she essentially becomes the spoil sport, ruining the game for everyone. Buying into the game means not only accepting the inanimate figures as living characters, but also accepting a role as a part of the whole, essentially bridging the gaps (or filling the blanks) between themselves and their fellow spectators. Interestingly, this

responsibility seems to run somewhat counter to the Tinka example, in which many spectators acted individually in their final professing of love for Schnitzel. Yet here too the need for collectivity is highlighted in Madame Rodrigue's training of the audience to respond to her entrance. Indeed, the need for a cohesive audience exists in both examples but, as Burkett attests, the improvisational basis of Tinka allowed for more flexibility insofar as he was able to control the audiences' responses by playing off their reactions (Burkett, Personal interview). By freeing him from the confines of the script, Tinka's structure affords Burkett more opportunities to tease a group mentality out of the disparate spectators. Street of Blood, on the other hand, relies on a clearer dramatic structure that entrusts the spectators more completely with the task of uniting as an audience.

The concept of uniting seemingly dissimilar elements, therefore, exists both in the dramatic and performance texts of the piece. The notion of blood and familial ties woven throughout the text parallels the monopolylogic performance uniting the various characters through Burkett's body, which in turn mirrors the audience's desired union as a cohesive whole. Indeed, the play itself operates on multiple of levels that are at times tenuously connected: the microcosm of Turnip Corners coupled with the macrocosmic presence of Christ and a troupe of blood-hoarding vampires. Edna's private family drama shares the stage with Christ's latest attempt to speak to his people, actor-turned-vampire Spanky Bishop's guilt over his lack of action during the Holocaust, Esmé's disturbing childhood memories, and snippets from Hollywood movies. As one reviewer observes,

"The play does not, in fact, hang together very well. And yet it feels like a masterpiece" (Cushman, "Compelling"). In fact, Cushman's astute remark demonstrates the crux of the piece: while individual components might lack perfection, the union of the whole makes up for that which is lacking.

CONCLUSION

While Burkett's Memory Dress Trilogy may be considered the turning point in his already illustrious career, by no means did it mark the end of his success. Provenance, Burkett's first adult piece to follow the Memory Dress Trilogy, premiered at Edmonton's Theatre Network in 2003. The play's protagonist, Pity Beane, is a plain-faced Canadian art student whose obsession with the origin of a painting brings her to Vienna in a quest to reconstruct its history. In Pity, Burkett's penchant for the outsider is immediately detectable. Raised by a gay male couple and rejected by her peers, Pity recalls earlier outsiders Carl and Eden, with her mission to discover the origins of a painting mirroring Carl's quest to find an outlet for his political rage and Eden's search for his birth mother. Similarly, as John Coulbourn observes, Burkett's pallet continues to rely on the "by-now familiar milieu peopled by cabaret artists, drag queens, wise-cracking gays, endearing crones and wise old men" ("Zing").

Even so, Burkett's stylistic experimentations were far from over. Consciously shying away from the improvisation of earlier shows like Tinka and Happy, Burkett crafted an atypically dense text for his marionettes to perform, including moments of blank verse and rhyming couplets. As he pushed his writing to new ambitious heights, Burkett continued to experiment with his performance aesthetic as well. More than any of Burkett's other works, Provenance saw Burkett the puppeteer invading the world of his marionettes. Largely for the sake of creating seamless transitions and keeping pacing

consistent, Burkett chose to continue scenes while putting the marionettes away and setting up for the following scene, himself becoming the character who was moments ago performed by a marionette (Burkett, Personal interview). The reactions to this new aesthetic choice were decidedly mixed. While many counted Provenance among Burkett's finest work, others chided the artist for his accentuated presence in the piece, accusing him of invading the puppets' world to the point of distraction. Burkett confesses that "for most people's taste I was out there more than they wanted" (Burkett, Personal interview), but does not apologize for the choice. Although Burkett's style has solidified over the years, he continues to alter his choices for each individual show.

Proof of this commitment to experimentation comes in the form of Burkett's 2006 show 10 Days on Earth, the story of Darrel, a mentally challenged man whose reliance on his aging mother Ivy is tested when she passes away in her bedroom. Taught not to enter his mother's room without permission, Darrel spends the next ten days unaware of Ivy's death, struggling with feelings of abandonment and confusion as his desperation to communicate with his mother mounts. Unlike Provenance's surfeit of puppeteer presence, 10 Days on Earth finds Burkett dressed in black, as separate from the action as he has ever been. Dimly lit, raised above the action on a platform, and partially concealed by the walls of the set that hide his legs from the audience, Burkett only draws attention to himself as the narrator of Darrel's favourite children's show, but these brief moments of presence are subtle and far outweighed by the others. Still, the tension between the puppeteer and his puppets is not obliterated; several shows

into the run, Burkett had to ask the lighting technician to turn the lights on him up slightly, because people still wanted to see him at work (Personal interview).

With the almost bombastic text and conspicuous puppeteer presence of Provenance juxtaposed with the comparatively simplistic dialogue and strong puppet focus of 10 Days on Earth, it is difficult to predict Burkett's next step. Reportedly, he is in the process of developing a new show entitled Billy Twinkle, Requiem for a Golden Boy which will once again showcase his acting skills sans puppet: Burkett will play a series of puppeteers, including an evangelist with a Muppet of Jesus (Weir, 74). Once again, this piece will mark a huge experiment for Burkett, proving that, at the age of 40, the artist has no intentions of following the safe, well-trodden path. Still, according to Burkett himself, the ultimate goal of Theatre of Marionettes is not to create more and more dazzling spectacles, but rather to dazzle with increasingly simplistic means:

> when I'm in my 70's I will have learned how to stand on a bare stage with three puppets and do a better show. So for all the bells and whistles and the multiple puppets and for all the carousels...which I love...it is intriguing to me to think doing more with less is the ultimate goal. (Personal interview)

This thesis attempts to critically engage with the work of this fascinating theatre artist working in a unique and often critically ignored medium, contributing to the sparse scholarly sources already available. However, several lacunae still exist in the critical discourse surrounding Burkett's work. The charges of sentimentality that have dogged him throughout his career, for

instance, beg the question of whether the melodrama present in all of Burkett's performances help or hurt his ultimate goal. The politics of Burkett's work have also been ignored by most scholars, leaving the question of his theatre's political stakes largely unanswered. Often, it is the broader themes—loneliness, grief, or a lack of belonging, for instance—that strike a chord with audiences, rather than the more specific political commentaries. Despite his commitment to addressing issues such as AIDS, queer identity, homophobia, political oppression and many others, the entertainment and experiential qualities of Burkett's puppetry tend to overshadow the intricacies of the issues explored, opening a debate as to the political aptitude of the pieces. Likewise, with the exception of Stoessner's thesis, little work has been done focusing on Burkett's texts, themselves fascinating theatrical artefacts. These and innumerable more areas of study remain untapped in the work of this unique and versatile artist.

Just as Burkett's work deserves analysis beyond the scope of this thesis, so the aesthetics of the puppet theatre require further attention. The trinity suggested here as the fundamental core of puppet theatre has not been satisfactorily tested in relation to puppet performances other than Burkett's, nor have the differences between children and adult audiences been explored. How does the puppet-puppeteer-audience dynamic change depending on the level of abstraction of the puppet? Do audiences react similarly to the tomato playing Macbeth as they do to Burkett's exquisitely carved human creations? The puppet's function as allegory, as well, deserves further attention. Insofar as the essence of allegory is its encouragement of a variety of meanings at once—the literal and the allegorical—

how does this effect hermeneutics of puppet theatre? The metonymic nature of the puppets' figurative signification also seems to originate in its function as allegory. The spectator's hermeneutic response to the manipulated puppet happens within a moment of recognition of the proximity between puppet and the phenomenological world surrounding it. These questions and observations clearly indicate that further work needs to be done.

As adult puppet theatre gains popularity thanks to artists like Burkett, this unique and enduring theatrical art will find new ways to explore its exciting potential. For Burkett, these explorations seem to suggest a move towards simplicity—a bare stage and a puppet, while others, like American puppeteer Basil Twist, want to create highly visual, surreal theatrical experiences. Long Island native Paul Zaloom continues to work with various forms of puppets, including objects found in the trash, to create politically aware theatre, while countless contemporary artists incorporate puppets into their otherwise live-actor pieces. As Michael Meschke says, "[t]he puppet theatre is a theatre of unlimited possibilities" (20), and as self-proclaimed puppeteers and other theatre artists tap into these potentials the results continue to open new outlets for theatrical experimentation and expression.

In this theatrical age of the postdramatic, intermediality, and what Tinka's Franz calls "post-modern new millennium electronic Dutch dance wank performance art" (Burkett, Tinka, 35), it is remarkable that audiences are increasingly enthralled by the simplicity of the puppet theatre. We are constantly inundated with stimuli from our high definition televisions, our laptop computers

beaming the internet to our fingertips wherever we may be, the hyperreality of the IMAX film experience, or the glamour of the mega-musical spectacle. In the face of this culture of sensory overload, audiences clearly crave a more minimal aesthetic. More theatres include puppet shows in their seasons, with puppets playing to sold-out houses. The incredibly rich cultural experience of Ronnie Burkett's Theatre of Marionettes is a clear sign of the explosive potential of the puppet theatre in our age.

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